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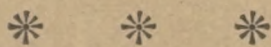




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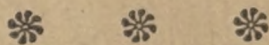
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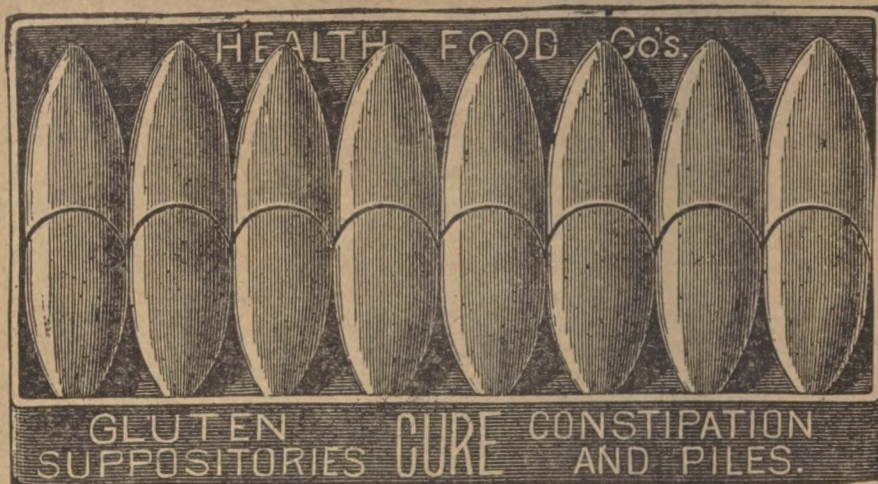
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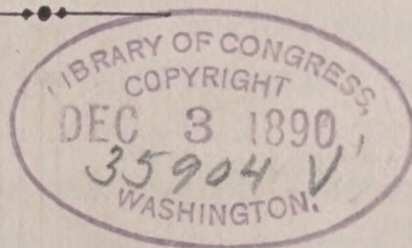
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By MARY E. BRYAN.

"I'm most as bad off about a name as I am about a daddy and mammy. Granny calls me Cub, and that means a young bear; and t'others calls me Manch, and that means as bad."

"Manch! What *does* it mean?"

"Why, the wise folks that says Harriet's my mother, says my father is a Comanche Injun—a brave that was hung or shot some time or other for taking scalps. They call me Comanche from him—Manch for short, you know. Do I look like an Injun?"

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M A N C H .

CHAPTER I.

THE sun rose above the great wall of woods that girt the horizon: the mist rolled up from the river like a curtain and revealed the village of Bear's Bend. Village it could hardly be called—a mere border settlement in a Western Territory—a handful of log cabins scattered along the eastern bank of a river, and along the bayou that here returned to its parent stream. Fertile though half-cultivated fields lay immediately about this little nucleus of civilization, and beyond these stretched the virgin forest. The houses were grouped mostly along the lower portion of a broad elbow of the river, which seemed to bend in here to meet the bayou—a mere rivulet in dry seasons, but a stream of formidable width during the “rainy spell.”

As the first rays of the sun pierced the mist of the river, the blacksmith swung open the door of his shanty and began to kindle a fire in his forge. He was not the first to be astir at Bear's Bend. “Cheap Jacob,” the proprietor of the one “store”—a combination of dry-

goods store, grocery, and grog-shop—was before him, and had been standing some time, pipe in mouth, at the door of his establishment, on the lookout for customers. A flatboat had brought him a fresh supply of goods and whisky the evening before, and he anticipated lively trade. “Sheap Jacob, der Peeple’s friend,” as he styled himself, was a huge-nosed, keen-eyed specimen of that indefatigable race which is sure to follow, with budget of “dry goots,” in the footsteps of the adventurous pioneer. Jacob’s transactions were by no means confined to cash. Dried meats, hides, furs, tallow, wax, and other results of backwoods marksmanship and industry, were piled in the back part of his shop, until such time as his partner should convey them in his flatboat to Fairtown, a more important village fifty miles down the river, and there exchange them for civilized products or for money. Sometimes, though rarely, a bag or a handful of the precious dust itself came into the clutches of the little Jew; for miners, returning from the gold-hills farther west, occasionally took a route that led them by Bear’s Bend, and refreshed their inner man with liquor, and their outer with new clothes from Jacob’s shelves. He had thriven by his trade, and instead of his former shanty had now, as his “store,” a cabin more pretentious than his neighbors’, built just at the junction of the river and bayou, streaked here and there with red paint, and surmounted by a sign that announced, in astonishing letters, “Wear House here, and fine whisky and dry goots for sale.”

As the morning advanced, Jacob’s customers began to drop in, some of them bringing fresh skins of deer, bear, or wildcat, which having disposed of in trade, they pro-

ceeded to tack up on the outside of the store, giving that building a sinister aspect. By the time the sun was an hour high quite a group had collected upon the little stoop in front of the shop. They sat perched upon barrels, or sprawled upon the hewn-log benches, discussing old or recent hunts, the crop prospects, the probability of an Indian raid, or gravely commenting upon such tidings of the busy world as could be gleaned from a newspaper a month old, brought by Jacob's partner of the flatboat. No matter what its date, a newspaper was a godsend to the citizens of Bear's Bend, and was by common consent put into the hands of Captain Brown, who read it aloud to the attentive group in a voice that sounded like a general's addressing his troops.

He was a remarkable-looking personage, this Captain Brown, notwithstanding his very common name. In any crowd the eye would have singled him out as beyond the ordinary. Here, at Bear's Bend, he was looked upon as a kind of chief, by virtue of the inherent right to rule expressed in his eye and voice. As for his antecedents, the settlers knew nothing and cared but little. All they knew was that he appeared among them suddenly at the close of an autumn day, riding a blooded but jaded horse, and carrying as his only baggage a female child upon the pommel of his saddle and a rifle across his shoulder. The possession of the child won for him the sympathy of the women, and his superior handling of the gun secured the respectful consideration of the men. Indeed, so skilled did he show himself in the use of this trusty friend of the backwoodsman, and so cool and keen in the hunt, that he was chosen leader in an affray with the Indians that took place shortly after his settling at Bear's Bend.

The dignified reserve of his manner, and his reputation for "high larning," as well as for unflinching integrity, caused him to be invested with the authority of a kind of judge, and he was appealed to to settle all disputes and give judgment on all important matters occurring in the community. On only one point did he show weakness—his treatment of his daughter. He at the same time indulged and neglected her, until it was no marvel that she grew up warm-hearted, passionately fond of her father, but impulsive and willful. But utterly as he neglected the improvement of her mind, he seemed to build hopes of some kind upon the girl, and often spoke of sending her back to the States to be educated, "after a while," seeming strangely unconscious of the fact that she was fast growing up, and was no longer a little child; and it was therefore a most unlooked-for shock to him when the girl, in her fifteenth year, married into a family that was contemned and looked down upon in the settlement. Border society is by no means nice or difficult of access; but when it chooses to ostracize it does so more effectually and terribly than can be done by the leaders of the *haut monde*.

The father of the young man who married Milly Brown had committed the unpardonable crime of turning traitor to his race and color; was accused of painting himself as an Indian, and joining the savages in a raid upon the whites. There was no positive proof, but circumstantial evidence was so strong that the settlers served Lynch law upon him, by hanging him on the great Live Oak, near the old block-house that had been the nucleus of their settlement. The family was thenceforth shunned and degraded below the level of savages. The fierce, bitter old

mother acquired the reputation of a witch, and was said to "conjure" any unfortunate horse or pig that might stray into her corn-field; according to the report, these always came out blind or with a shriveled leg. The two sons hunted and fished by themselves, and avoided meeting their neighbors, while the girl plied her wheel and loom in solitude, and peeped shyly at passers-by as though they were beings of a different order from herself.

Neil Griffin's marriage with the daughter of the "Cap'n" was a matter of great astonishment to the neighbors, but it came about in a natural way. The young man rendered the girl some service—fished her out of the river into which her heedlessness had upset her—and so excited at the same time her gratitude and her admiration of his pluck and promptitude. Her sympathy was also awakened for a being so isolated; and it all ended in a marriage to which she would not suffer the young man to ask her father's consent, knowing well that it would not have been given. It was a terrible blow to Captain Brown, but he bore it in silence and gave no sign. Indeed, after a time, he seemed reconciled in part to his daughter, and even showed some appreciation of the earnest and patient efforts made by Neil Griffin to gain his good will.

See him now as he reads, in a soiled and crumpled copy of the "Chicago Times," the account of an exciting political mass meeting in that city. Note how his bony fingers twist nervously in his long, iron-gray hair and beard. News of politics, of successful speculation, of gold-gambling, or any similar stirring occurrence in the busy world, always excited him in this way. Ordinarily it was not apparent, unless to a nice observer. Now, however,

the vivid description produced an unusual effect; there was a tremor in his firm, military voice, and when he looked up you caught a flash from his eye that startled you. It was eager—almost wild. It made you fancy that the reason he drooped his eyes in his habitually abstracted fashion was to hide the fire of a restless soul—a fire which leaped up at a breath from the outer world. Looking at him, you wondered if this grim, taciturn hunter was ever an actor in that world of politics, trade, and speculation, whose distant echo now stirred him as a bugle-blast stirs the idle war-horse.

It is not likely that his companions indulged in any such speculations. One at least did not. Cheap Jacob's imagination seldom extended beyond the radius of the dollar. His keen eye just then discovered a flat coming across the bayou, containing three men, and he interrupted the reader by exclaiming :

"Well! dat ish Tom Reed and Dick Allan coming back! What for dey cooms so soon, I wonder!"

"They went out on a bear-hunt to be gone all day," remarked another, half raising himself and leaning on his elbow. "They've left their horses on yon side."

"I lets 'em have hard-tack, and powder, and whisky, and dey bees to pay in meat and skins; and now dey cooms back mit noting, as I can see."

"There's Neil Griffin with them," said another. "Did he go bear-hunting too?"

"Not he," was the answer. "He is too busy working on his house. That fellow looks as if he wanted to kill himself with work since he married. I suppose he wants to make a fortune for his little gal."

"Wants to please the Cap'n, you'd better say. I'm

blamed if he wouldn't be willing to sign papers and agree to be a slave for the Cap'n all his life, just to get into his good graces," spoke another of the group, glancing at Captain Brown, who had been wont to smile grimly when similar remarks were made in his hearing. But now his face was shaded by his hand, and its expression was concealed.

"Well, dere *ish* someting at the bottom of the flat," said the Jew, continuing his examination, "but I makes it out more man dan bear."

"It *is* a man!" cried another—"a man lying down there asleep, or dead. I say, men, ain't that blood on his face and breast?"

Instantly every man sprang to his feet and hurried down to the bank to which the flat was now approaching.

A little farther down the bayou, in a log-cabin close to the water-side, another person was watching the approach of the flat in which the loungers at the store were so much interested. It was a very girlish face that looked from the small window hung with purple-blossomed "traveler's delight." Indeed, the immature features, the youthful droop and curve of the shoulders, and that wistful, someway pathetic look about the eyes and mouth gave the impression of its being almost a child's face. She looked out a little anxiously along the river, and her eyes lighted up as she caught sight of the flat.

"Yes, there's Neil," she said. "I am glad he's coming back so soon. I'll have breakfast all ready and be pleasant-like to make amends for what I said last night. After all, I ought not to grumble about being poor with such a kind husband. I never did such a thing before. It all came of that man showing his gold and jewels, and

telling about the fine things he meant to give the wife and children he had not seen for so long. Oh! I do love beautiful things! I should like so much to wear jewels and long, flowing dresses, bright-colored like the clouds, and to live in a house with white walls and pictures, and be able to hear music, and be accomplished as my mother must have been. I know my mother was a lady. She looks like I suppose a lady must look."

She opened a little carved wooden box that Neil had made for her, and which contained her few small treasures, and took from it a miniature in a plain case attached to a ribbon. It represented a lovely woman handsomely dressed.

"Yes, my mother was a lady. How sweet and grand she looks! She has a ring on her pretty hand. I wonder if it is a diamond like the one the old miner showed us last night? What would I give to wear such a ring as that? But if I had it I would sell it. No doubt it would bring a great price, and the money would help Neil to get rich; and if he were rich, perhaps my father would like him. Oh! if my father would but like Neil, I should be happy enough."

She sighed, and the long brown lashes dropped for an instant upon her cheek. Then turning to the window she looked out again, and saw that the flat had landed opposite the store, and the three men had got out.

"Neil has brought over some men in the flat," thought Milly. "They are hunters and have some kind of big game—bear, it looks like. They'll go to the store, but Neil will be here directly."

She put up her miniature carefully, and went to put the breakfast, that had been kept warm by the fire, upon

the table in readiness for him. But the oatmeal cakes grew stiff, and the broiled venison was cold, before she heard a footstep at the door. Then it was not Neil's quick tread, but a hesitating, shuffling bare footstep. She was sitting down upon the floor giving the kitten its breakfast, but rose quickly and went to the door. There stood a hard-featured youth with a shock of red hair and small eyes, that made a point of looking everywhere but at your face while he spoke to you.

"You are wanted at the store," he said suddenly, rolling his eyes in a direction opposite the girl.

"Me! Wanted at the store? What's the matter? Is Neil sick?" asked Milly excitedly.

"No."

"Is my father there?"

"He's there."

"Is anything the matter with him?"

"No."

"What am I wanted for? What has happened?" inquired Milly.

"I was told to tell you you was wanted at the store, and I telled you," said the boy, rolling his marble between his fingers and staring hard at the rafters overhead.

"Well, that's comical," said Milly, laughing nervously as she tied a handkerchief over her short curls and followed the boy.

As she neared the store, she saw that something unusual had occurred. Every male individual in the settlement, boy and man, was there. They were standing in groups, and talking and gesticulating excitedly; but all became quiet as Milly stepped upon the porch. She looked around at their grave, agitated faces, and her

heart beat wildly. She saw her father standing a little to one side, his tall stature and iron-gray head showing above the rest. In front of her, leaning against the wall, was Neil, very pale and strange-looking, as she saw at a glance. His eye was upon her, and she was at his side in an instant.

“Neil, what is it? What has happened?”

“Don’t be frightened,” he said. “Don’t do yourself a hurt, Milly; be calm.”

“Why have they sent for me, Neil?”

“They want to ask you some questions.”

“Questions? about what? What is the matter with your hand, Neil?” she asked, trying to take his right hand out of his bosom, in which he had been keeping it while she talked to him. He resisted her attempt to do so for a moment; then suddenly, while an expression of intense pain passed over his face, he drew it out and held it before her eyes. She started; there was blood upon it.

“Neil, you are hurt,” she exclaimed, as she examined the bloody hand eagerly to see the extent of the injury. But she found no wound.

“Neil, what blood is this?”

He shook his head. She looked sharply into his face, then turned and looked into the faces of those around him, while a sick feeling crept to her heart.

“Your father will tell you about it,” said Neil huskily, as he gave her over to Captain Brown, who had now come to her side. “Don’t be too sudden with her,” he said. “Remember her condition.” Then turning himself half round, he locked his hands before him, and stood staring down at his blood-stained fingers, like one in a

dream. Milly turned to her father with eyes full of anxious appealing.

"Men," he said, with a slight wave of his hand toward the assembled villagers, "here is my daughter; ask her what you wish."

"No, no, Cap'n," demurred several voices at once. "Ask her yourself; you understand all about it."

"And you know how to be easy with her, poor thing," added an old hunter, whose heart was in the right place.

"Milly," said her father—and it was noticeable that his usually firm voice trembled with pardonable emotion—"what time did your husband leave the house this morning?"

"He went off at daybreak, to put a man across the river who had stopped with us all night. The man asked Neil to go with him a little way to put him on the road to Fairtown."

"Who was this man, and what was his age and appearance?"

"He was a miner, all the way from the gold-diggings, and was going home. He was a middle-aged man, with long, grayish hair and beard, and wore dressed buckskin breeches and—"

"Did he have mooch money, child?" interrupted the Jew.

Milly hesitated, and looked back at her husband, but he did not raise his eyes.

"Speak out," said her father. "Did he have money?"

"Yes; he had gold and diamonds. He did not want any one to know it, for fear of being robbed. He showed it to us, because he seemed to take to my husband; and, besides, I think he was drinking a good deal

of whisky. He was in high spirits about going home, and was very open with us about his money."

"Where did he carry it?"

"In a leather belt around his waist, a part of it, and some of it was quilted in a vest he had on, made out of a rattlesnake's skin. He had lumps of gold and a bag of diamonds, which he said came from Brazil."

"Mein Fader!" exclaimed the Jew.

"Had the man any diamond rings, Milly?" asked the Captain of the bewildered and troubled girl.

"Yes, he had one. It was roughly set. I think he told us he did it himself."

"Like this?" cried the Jew, running up to Neil, and holding up the prisoner's hand, on the little finger of which shone a diamond rudely set in a heavy gold band.

Milly looked in wonder. "That is like the ring he made me try on my finger last night. Neil must have bought it."

"Joost so," sneered the Jew. "Yes, I reckon so."

"I gave my knife for it, Milly," said Neil—"the dagger-knife that came from my grandfather. You know the old man wanted to buy it. I let him have it for the ring for you."

"We come upon him with that knife in his hand, a-stoopin' over the body," said the hunter, Tom Reed, holding out the silver-mounted Mexican knife, red with blood.

"The body!" repeated Milly, looking wildly at her father. "Where is the old miner?"

"He is dead."

"Murdered!" exclaimed the Jew, "and de pody

robbed. Pelt and vest, loomps of gold and pag of diamonds, all gone!"

"Murdered! Oh! who did it?"

"Who did it? Dot ish plain. Look dere at de bloody hand, and den look here, vill you?"

He threw open the door of the store before Captain Brown could interfere, and Milly caught a glimpse of a ghastly, gory figure, stretched out on a bench just within the door, the breast and long grizzly beard matted with blood.

"Wretch! what do you mean by showing her that?" cried Captain Brown, catching the dealer by the collar and throwing him to the farther extremity of the porch. Then he stooped to raise Milly, who had dropped to her knees, but Neil was before him. He had Milly in his arms, rubbing her forehead with his blood-stained fingers.

She was not insensible, and soon stood upon her feet, clinging to her husband.

"Take her home, Captain," said Neil—"take her home and be good to her, for God's sake!"

But Milly kept her hands upon her husband's arm.

"I won't go, Neil, till I hear from your own mouth that you did not kill the old man. I don't believe you did; I never can believe it; but I want to hear you deny it with your own lips."

"I did not kill the man, Milly," said Neil, looking in her face. It was remarkable that, though his tone was impressive, he spoke sadly and without animation. There was nothing of the indignant accent of denial, such as might have been expected.

"What right had they to accuse you of such a thing?"

"They came upon me by the body, with the bloody

knife, in my hand—my knife there, that I had swapped to him, as I told you, for the ring you wanted. I parted with him at the road—left him a-fixing his stirrup-strap; and when I had gone about a couple of hundred yards I heard a loud cry, and, while I stood listening, the miner's horse come galloping by with his head up and snortin'. I run back as fast as I could, and there lay the old man under Gallows Oak, dyin'. He'd been knocked down, and then stabbed with the knife he got from me. It was stickin' in his breast, and he motioned me to draw it out. I pulled it out, and the blood come in a spurt as thick as my wrist. The man gasped and died without saying a word. Then Reed and Allan came up and found me there."

"Go on," said Tom Reed. "Why don't you tell the rest? Tell how, when we come upon you, you was a-starin', now at the knife, and now at the woods, and a-mutterin' some kind o' gibberish, after the fashion of your conjurin' old marm. I'm blest if we didn't hear him mutterin' about his wife. He didn't seem to notice us, and, when we asked about the murder, he said he didn't do it. Then we asked who did do it, and he shook his head, mum as a mole. Afterward he burst out with somethin' that meant he had seen the murderer. 'Where is he now?' asked my comrade here, and Neil Griffin stared around like mad, and said: 'Gone for good and all, he hoped. He trusted never to set eyes upon him again.' But nary time would he tell us who he was. Just put the question to him straightforward-like, Cap'n. Ask him if he saw the man that did the killin'."

Captain Brown did not speak immediately. Some undercurrent of feeling, perhaps pity, perhaps mortifica-

tion, seemed to stir within him; for the muscles of his mouth and forehead twitched slightly, and his olive cheek went a shade paler. He hesitated, and while he did so Neil Griffin raised his eyes, and looked him full in the face for a minute. It would be hard to decide upon the expression or analyze the meaning of that look. Whatever it was, it seemed to have some effect upon his stern father-in-law. The contracted lines of the Captain's face gave way, and he put the question in almost his ordinary tone, but not in the form suggested by Tom Reed.

"Did you see any person in the act of committing this murder?"

"Not *in the act*, Cap'n," interposed Reed. "The act was already committed. He give us to understand that there was a man stoopin' over the body as he run up, and the man was robbin' the body. Says he made off with the plunder, he *thinks*."

"He tink!" exclaimed Cheap Jacob. "Where pees his eyes? Dat ish one likely shtory! Vell, who was de murderer?"

"That's what we want to know," sounded the stentorian voice of Dick Allan, speaking for the first time. "Who is the murderer? Tell us *that*, Neil Griffin."

"Yes, tell us that," echoed a dozen voices, and the circle of stern, excited faces began to narrow around Neil. "Tell us who did the murder."

He did not reply, but kept his eyes fixed upon his hands, as though the stain of blood upon them fascinated his gaze.

"He said it was somebody he knew," cried Allan. "We asked him, and he threw up his arms and said: 'O Lord! yes. Who would have thought it!'"

"It was one of his redskin friends, may be," sneered another, in allusion to the Griffins' suspected complicity with the Indian marauders—the crime for which Neil's father had been hanged on the Cross Roads Oak.

"May be it was Gabe," observed another, "his big bud Gabe. A chip of the same block."

"Gabe's down with the fever, you know."

"Pshaw! old Hagar could cure that quick enough with her witch-yarbs, if there was any devil's work to be done."

"Bosh!" cried Allan's clarion voice, as he threw out one brawny leg, and swept around his arm impatiently. "This is all child's play. That fellow's story carries the lie on its face. If he knew the murderer, he'd speak out soon enough to save his own neck from the noose. We'll help him to a knowledge of the murderer. That ring and them bloody hands and knife does the business, let alone lots of other suspicious things. *Men, there stands the fellow that killed the old man!*" And he leveled his great forefinger at Neil Griffin's face.

"*Yes; there he stands. We know that!*" responded a chorus of voices.

"Neil, do you hear that!" cried Milly, turning to her husband. "Have you lost your senses? Don't you see your life is in danger? Why do you not tell them the name of the man you saw?"

He looked down tenderly at her, but said nothing.

"Won't you tell who it was, Neil?"

"No, Milly," he whispered, grasping tightly the hands that clutched him so vehemently.

"Father, speak to him. He can't be in his right mind. Tell him to speak out, and clear himself of this black deed."

"He will do it sooner for you than any one else, Milly. It is his duty to think of you. If he thinks it best for you that he should tell the name of the man who did the murder, he ought to tell it at once."

"Best for me!" cried Milly. "Of course it is best for me and for him that he should clear himself at once. Neil, speak out, and tell who it was that did the murder. Won't you for my sake—for my sake, Neil?"

"For your sake, Milly, I would die," he said low, holding her hands tightly in his, and looking at her with passionate fire burning up through the troubled depths of his eyes—"for your sake, I would die."

Then, as if forgetting the presence of others, he went on in that impassioned undertone:

"Most like, it would be best for you if I did die. I've spoilt your life, my girl, well as I love you. I see that now. I've made you marry where you'll always be ashamed. I was not good enough for you, and my people are not fit for you to call kin. You've had to give up your friends, and well-nigh your father, for me. I know you care more for your father than you do for me. I don't wonder at it either. I know he could do a better part by you than I can. He'd have made a lady of you if you hadn't married me: as you said last night."

"Neil, are you thinking of those wicked things I said last night? I never would have said them but for the sight of all those jewels, and the man's talk about high life and grand people. I didn't mean it; I don't want to be a lady. You surely are not letting what I said work on your mind, and make you give yourself up to be suspected of this murder?"

"That's not all; that's not all," he said hurriedly.

"But I can't say any more. Go home, my girl—go home now. I'll see you again."

The poor young wife had sustained herself bravely so far, as became a border girl; but now she was sobbing hysterically. The thought that her unkind words the night before, the promptings of her girlish vanity, had rankled in her husband's mind, and perhaps lay at the bottom of all this trouble, overpowered her. She wept in Neil's arms, like the child she was. He kissed her sadly enough, and comforted her by the assurance that he would soon see her again, and relinquished her to her father, who led her away from the scene of confusion.

Her going away was the signal for the repressed excitement to break forth. Dick Allan, the stalwart bully of Bear's Bend, came to the front, and, planting himself firmly, declared they must proceed to business.

"That chat about your knowing the murderer and won't tell who he be is a thin tale, my chap. We can't swallow it, nohow. It was jest you as knocked the old man over, and then hid the plunder—buried it belike—and come back to see if you had made sure work of your victim. And that's when we found you and scared you half out of your wits."

"Joost make a clean breast of it, boy, and tell us where you hid the money, and may be it'll go lighter mit you," coaxed the Jew.

"I'll tell nothing more than I have told," said Neil, "let you do what you will."

"And do you know what we'll do, my fine chap? We'll hang you on Gallows Oak, as sure as you stand there."

"Hang away, then," said the young man doggedly.

“You hanged my father there, declarin’ he was innocent with his last breath. You’ve persecuted us like hounds on the track of a sick deer; you’ve abused my mother for a witch; you’ve scared my sister into an idiot; you’ve dogged my brother into a coward; and you’d ’ave made a villain of me, but for one thing—that’s Milly; and you’ll make her turn against me and hate me if you can. Hang away; I don’t care for life.”

With that he drew his bearskin cap down over his forehead, folded his arms, and spoke no more through all the noisy discussion that followed. At its conclusion he was marched out to the block-house as the safest and most suitable lock-up, and there placed in confinement.

The block-house, which served the settlers for a jail as well as a fort, was situated on the opposite side of the bayou, a mile or two below Bear’s Bend, and half a mile out from the river. It had been built before Bear’s Bend was cleared, and was meant as a protection from the Indians and the beginning of a village. The site had been chosen with an eye to health as well as to defense, being a high hill, crowned with magnificent live-oaks, and supplied with an unfailing spring of cold water.

Circumstances had induced the transfer of the future village to Bear’s Bend, and the block-house and a few dismantled cabins were all that was left at the Cross Roads, so called because two roads, coming respectively from the south and east, and cut by trains of emigrant wagons, intersected each other at this place.

The block-house, in which the settlers had formerly sheltered themselves in a time of Indian hostilities, was a substantial building of heavy hewn logs, closely joined, and pierced at intervals with port-holes for guns in case

of attack. It was mounted upon cypress posts, fifteen feet high, and had one small door, which was reached by a ladder. This door was now fastened by a padlock and chain, and in the great, bare room within sat Neil, his face buried in his hands, left alone at last with his own thoughts. Two of the men of Bear's Bend mounted guard over the prisoner by sitting on the bottom round of the ladder playing "seven-up," the stake being drinks from a black flask, furnished by their friends by way of compensation for their service as jailers. They had been left to their game but a short time, however, for the whole male population of the village and neighborhood had assisted in escorting the prisoner to the block-house, and, having exhausted every inducement of persuasion and threats to make him reveal where he had hidden the jewels and money, had remained all the forenoon searching everywhere for them. But all in vain. No sign of the treasure had been discovered, and the prisoner persisted in declaring that he did not know what had become of it. They had therefore returned to the village to attend to the burial of the dead man.

Later in the afternoon, the remains of the gold-digger having been consigned to the grave, the settlers met at the "store" to sit in council upon Neil Griffin. Their deliberations, however, referred rather to the time than the manner of his punishment. His fate was already fixed.

These border men were in the habit of taking the law into their own hands, and when they decided against an offender his punishment followed with terrible swiftness and certainty. They were peculiar in their decisions. They looked with a lenient eye upon all fair fights and

“scrimmages,” and even upon cases where a bloody vengeance was taken for a wrong done to one’s self or one’s relations and friends. On the other hand, stealing a horse was a heinous offense; complicity with hostile Indians was a crime that called for a “h’ist to the nighest limb,” as they phrased it; and a case like the one before them, of cold-blooded murder for money, not only shocked their feelings of humanity, but outraged their sense of manly courage—a sneaking, cowardly crime, and therefore unpardonable.

Neil Griffin’s fate was settled from the first. Not only were the circumstances of the murder against him, but he had to withstand the fixed prejudice of the settlers. His father’s crime and its dreadful expiation had thrown the shadow of suspicion over the two sons. Neil’s refusal to say who the murderer was, after the declaration that he had seen him (which had apparently escaped him involuntarily at that first moment of discovery), together with his avowed ignorance concerning the money that had been robbed from the miner, further exasperated these men who held his life in their hands.

They owed him another grudge—that of having married pretty Milly Brown. In view of the fact that the Captain had bitterly condemned this marriage, his conduct in regard to the murderer excited no little surprise. The men at Bear’s Bend had been wont to follow his leadership, but in this instance his action was so lukewarm as to call for comment. He seemed actually to lean to the side of mercy for the prisoner, judging from the few remarks that could be elicited from him. It was after one of these dubious utterances that Dick Allan jumped to his feet, and discharging a quid of tobacco

from his mouth, demanded to know just how the Captain stood.

“Out with it, Cap. Give us your ijees straight as a bullet to a buck’s head. That’s your way of old. I know sarcumstances alters cases, and ye’re father-in-law to this fellow, more’s the pity, but you knows what jestice is, and you’ve got the grit to go agin sarcumstances. So let’s hear your say so in this here matter. The boys are a-listenin’ for it.”

All eyes were turned to Captain Brown. His manner was not quite so calm as usual. His long, sinewy, brown hand went up to his head and brushed back a lock of hair that hid a scar on his temple. The bluish mark was very noticeable on the paleness of his skin.

“Men,” he began, “this business looks bad for Griffin. The circumstances are dead against him.”

“That’s so, ye’re right there,” assented several voices.

“But I have heard of cases where appearances were as bad against a man, and yet he was innocent.”

No response to this for half a minute; then Dick Allan, rolling his quid in his cheek, said dryly:

“Well, you’ve heard of more’n I have.”

Captain Brown went on: “Under the circumstances I think the best and safest course would be to make him leave the settlement at once, under oath never to come back to it again. If he breaks this oath, he is to suffer the penalty of hanging. In this way we get rid of him without having his blood, which *may be* innocent blood, upon our hands.”

Saying this, the Captain inclined his head with the commanding air peculiar to him, and went out of the room.

Dick Allan stared after him in amazement, and fell to chewing his fresh quid vehemently.

"Well, if any man 'ad told me Cap'n Brown would have said sich as that, I'd 'a give him the lie direct, blast me if I wouldn't! The idea of turning a cold-blooded murderer loose to dig up his plunder the first night he's free, go back to the States, or somewhar else, and live in clover the balance of his life! The Cap'n's a good one to lead, whether the game be bear or redskin, but never will I follow him in this yer thing. If 'twas any other man besides Cap'n Brown, I'd say that he was a-winkin' at the robbery and murder in hopes to get a share of the money."

"No, no!" cried several voices in a breath.

"No, that's not Cap'n Brown," said the old gray-haired hunter. "I'd just as soon believe it of George Washington if he war alive. You mustn't be too brash jumpin' to conclusions. You must 'low a man some nateral feelin's. Remember, the fellow is the husband of the Cap'n's darter, and we all know how little Milly used to be the darlin' of his heart and the apple of his eye. Then the Cap'n's high-toned. You can't blame him for hatin, to have a gallows-bird in his family, or not likin' to be the one to tie the hemp round the gullet of his future grandchild's father. Ain't that so?"

"Yes, that's true," promptly responded the conclave.

"Well, let's have respect for the Captain's nateral feelin's, and do what we are going to do without troublin' of him."

"All right," cried Allan with alacrity. "And, look here, let me tack on a word to what you've jest said. When a thing is to be did, the sooner the better. Our

boys can't stay out yonder a-guardin' the block-house, and leavin' the bears and coons to eat up their pigs and their corn-patches. Better go right off, and fix our prisoner so he can't get away, and be done with the job. What say you to going to-night—there's a fine moon, you know—about midnight, when the Cap'n and poor Milly's in bed asleep, and won't mistrust what's going on? It will save feelin's."

The proposition met with general favor, and it was finally agreed upon that they should go at the time suggested, make one final effort to induce the prisoner (with the halter around his neck) to confess the crime and give up the money, and then hang him on the same stout limb that had swung his father into eternity a few years before.

CHAPTER II.

MILLY had passed the day at her father's house. A day of wretchedness and anxiety it had been for her, although she was far from realizing the worst that might happen. She had been so in the habit of relying upon her father—of indulging in the belief that he could bend any circumstances to his will—that she trusted with child-like faith in his power to extricate Neil from his present trouble and make things come out right at last. Still she was deeply anxious, and her apprehensions rose as night drew on and her father did not come to allay her fears. She had seen him but once since he brought her to his own home that morning. She could not help remarking how pale and haggard he looked—what a fire

of repressed excitement glowed in his eyes, although his manner was so subdued and his words so few. He ate not a mouthful of the dinner that his old black attendant set before him, but he had brought Milly her food to her bedside and insisted upon seeing her taste it, while he enjoined upon her rest and quiet. Then he had left her instantly, and she had seen him no more that day.

She sat in the moonlight on the steps of the little porch, waiting anxiously for his coming. How often she had sat there upon moonlight nights only a few months ago, and watched the silken flitting of the great evening moths, and strung garlands of white and red "four-o'clocks" ("pretty-by-nights," she called them) upon blades of the long river-grass! She remembered how she would decorate her curly head with these, and make believe that they were pearls and diamonds, and that she was the grand lady of her day-dreams. This was such a short time ago, and yet it seemed so long. A gulf seemed to lie between then and now. Then she was such a careless, happy child, content with her flowers, her birds, and her castle-building; and now she seemed suddenly to have become a care-burdened woman, a woman of fifteen, with a husband that might be hanged for a felon. The very remembrance of the four-o'clock mock jewels smote her with a pang as she felt remorsefully that her craving for such things might possibly underlie all her present unhappiness. Occupied with such thoughts, and feeling every moment more lonely and apprehensive, she watched the hours wear on. The great horned owls hooted fearfully in the woods across the river, while in the willow near at hand the small screech-owl kept up its shuddering cry. Milly was growing more nervous every mo-

ment, and when at last she heard a footstep approaching, she hardly dared look up. It did not sound like her father's firm tread either; it was slower and more uncertain. But it was he nevertheless, and his daughter threw her arms around him with a feeling of deep relief and sobbed excitedly upon his breast. He soothed her by a few caressing touches on her brow and hair.

"Where is Neil? Haven't they set him free yet?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"When will they be done with him? I thought—I hoped you might bring him with you to-night, father."

He stroked her hair for a reply.

"Shall I see him to-morrow? Will they let him off then?"

"Milly," said the father gravely, "you heard the evidence against him. It was very strong. Do you think they would be apt to set him free so soon, if at all?"

"But he is innocent."

"They do not believe it."

"Father, what do you mean? Do you think they will hang him?"

"No, Milly; they shall not do that. But they will never set him free. He must escape. I will help him to get away. They have him shut in the block-house; I will manage to-morrow night that he shall make his escape. I will furnish him with money, and my horse Mort, the fastest in this country, shall be tied in the thicket close by. Before daybreak he must have left the settlement far behind, never to show his face here again."

“And I, father,” said Milly timidly; “how can I go with him?”

“You must not go at all, Milly. You must stay with me.”

“But when can I join him?”

“I don’t know. You must not think of that.”

“But, father, Neil is my husband.”

“Milly,” said her father, taking her on his knee and drawing her head to his shoulder, “he was never a match for you. It was a miserable piece of business, your marrying him. But I blame myself for it more than I do you—poor, neglected, motherless child that you were. He is not the husband for you, my daughter—not the husband for you. Forget him, Milly.”

“Father, I can’t do that; he is my husband, and—I love him.”

“You will outgrow this childish love. You are a mere child, Milly—not grown in stature even. You will be ashamed of this love when you are a matured, beautiful, educated woman.”

“I a beautiful, educated woman! How can that be?”

“It shall be. You have beauty and talent now, undeveloped, like the butterfly in its chrysalis. We will go away from here. I will fulfill my duty to you yet, Milly. You shall see the world—the grand, beautiful, gay, busy world. You shall learn the rare things there are in books, in music, in painting; you shall wear jewels—”

“No, never!” cried Milly, shuddering. “Not jewels; they would burn me after what has passed to-day.”

“You must forget what has passed to-day. You must

enter on a new life. Yes, you shall wear jewels, and have books and pictures."

"Such things cost money, do they not?" said Milly, beguiled for a moment out of her sorrow, as a child might be. "And we have no money."

"We shall have money," he whispered, laying his cheek to hers. Milly started, to feel how hot it was. Looking up with a sudden impulse, she caught sight of his face in the moonlight, and it seemed to her to be transformed in some way—to have a look on it that made her shrink. Her nervousness was returning. She shivered with an undefinable dread. Her father was about to speak again, when she stopped him.

"Hush! listen!"

The sound of quick and heavy hoof-strokes smote the still night-air. They came nearer. A tall, gaunt-limbed, wild-maned horse burst through the shrubbery and halted suddenly before them. A woman, also tall, and gaunt, and wild-looking, with streaming gray hair, leaped from his back to the ground, and confronted the father and daughter.

"Wretches!" she cried, "you sit here and chat in safety, while my son—the poor boy you've ruined—is at the mercy of a pack of human wolves. And you the cause of it—you!"

"What do you mean, woman?" exclaimed Captain Brown, rising to his feet. "How am I or my daughter the cause of your son's danger?"

"It was his marrying your baby-faced chit, it was his trying to gain your good will, that drove him to do this. It was the money that tempted him; it was to get money to please her and you that made him kill the man."

"He did not kill the man," said Milly. "He is innocent. My father believes him to be innocent."

"Then why does he not say so to *them*? Why is he not yonder putting down their devilish work? He is their leader; they will listen to him. Why does he not save my son's life? Why does he let him be hanged without a trial, when there is judge and jury to be had at Fairtown?"

"Save him I will at the proper time," said the Captain, his voice broken by agitation. "There is no immediate danger."

"No immediate danger!" screamed the woman. "Be you only pretendin', or don't you know what's goin' on? No danger, when, this minute, they've got him under Gallows Oak with a rope round his neck!"

"Great God! is this so?"

"So? Didn't I see 'em, the devils, draggin' him about with the rope round his neck, greedy as wolves for his blood, and holdin' back only in hopes to cheat or choke him into tellin' where the cussed money's hid? At this moment he may be swinging from Gallows Tree. My son! my pretty boy! Cursed be the hour he ever saw your faces!"

"Hush, woman!" cried the Captain harshly. "Would you kill the girl?"

He bent down over Milly, who had sunk to the floor, and cowered there, with her face hid in her trembling arms.

"No; she's not killed," said the woman, striding to her side. "And it's no time to drop down in a faint. Girl, get up, and bestir yourself, if you care one jot for the husband that would give his heart's blood for you."

Come with me; come, both of you, and save my son. Beg for his life, girl. I can't beg; curses come to my mouth instead. You are young and fair; they will listen to you when they'd only scoff at old Hagar the witch. Here, mount with me! Your father will get his horse and follow. We've no time to wait for the skiff. My mare is tall enough to ford the bayou. You needn't be scared at the water, I will hold you in my arms."

Milly had risen to her feet, ready, eager, nerved to attempt anything that might benefit Neil. The fierce old Hagar lifted her to a seat behind her, and, grasping her with her long, sinewy arm, shouted to her horse. In a moment they were fording the bayou; the cool, swift water rushed all around Milly, but the strong arm held her close.

The bank was gained; the deep shadows of the wood, where the owls flew shrieking with fright from the thundering hoofs of the horses—*two* horses, for Milly now became conscious that her father rode beside her. She saw his face for an instant, as a javelin of moonlight, piercing the black branches above, smote its ghastly pallor. He rode bareheaded, the hair bristling on his forehead, his face, his body rigid as that of a frozen corpse, his eyes staring straight forward.

Not a word was spoken. There was no sound during that fearful ride but the shout of the woman, urging on her flying horse—a wild, savage cry that startled the echoes of the mighty wood.

On, on, they sweep. They leave the river-swamp behind. The open country stretches before them. Gallows Hill rises to sight; the block-house looms up on its summit. Its black walls are dashed with the red glare

of torches. Torches flash beneath the gloom of the great tree known as Gallows Oak. In their lurid glow dusky shadows are seen moving to and fro—the shadows of men, that look in the red glare and dark background like the shapes of fiends seen in some dream of hell.

On, on, nearer and nearer press those who ride as for life. They can see the wild faces of the torch-bearers. They can hear a confused clash of voices, and now a sharp tone of command. The foot of the hill is gained, the horses are straining up its steep side, when a shout from a dozen throats, blent with one gurgling cry of mortal agony, rings out on the night, and Milly sees a man's form shoot up into sight from the oak's shadow, swing clear of the ground, and hang there, on the swaying limb, with the torch-glare full upon it; a sight to freeze the blood in woman's veins—a struggling human form, writhing, gasping, dying in the midst of life and health, at the hands of his fellow men.

Milly knew no more. She did not see her father's horse dash by her with flying bound, as the spur was driven in its bleeding side. She did not hear her father's voice shake the echoes with its stern cry of "Hold! hold! He is innocent! By the Lord, he is innocent!"

He dashed through the astonished group, with his knife gleaming in his hand; reached the swinging form; severed the rope with one mighty stroke, and, leaping from his horse, bent eagerly over the still body and felt for the pulse.

The purple face, the staring eyes, the protruding tongue, how ghastly they looked in the torchlight!

"Too late! My God, too late!" he exclaims..
 "Bloodthirsty fiends! how dare you thus take the law

in your own hands? How dare you take the life of your fellow man? Innocent blood be upon you for ever!" He uttered these words with terrible emphasis over the dead body, and staggered back in the shadow.

The silence of death fell upon the scene; but it was soon broken by a fearful sound—the raving curses of a woman—of a mother, with wild, gray hair, and blazing eyes, and bony arm uplifted, as she stood over the body of her son, and called down curses upon the heads of those who had destroyed him, who had destroyed both husband and son—both hanged on the fatal limb that yet shook above her.

They listened to her tremblingly. Those stout-hearted men, who had faced death so often, trembled with superstitious terror under the awful curses that rolled from the fierce woman's lips.

Not one dared lay hands upon the body. She stood over it like a bear over her dead cub, the fire of a desperate hate glaring in her eyes. They slunk away, almost in silence. Some busied themselves in assisting Captain Brown, who knelt upon the ground the picture of despair, for Milly his darling lay insensible in his arms, her frame shuddering in convulsions.

There was no work done at Bear's Bend next day. The smith's forge was silent, the hunter's hounds slept idle in the sun, and the "varmints" feasted undisturbed upon the corn-fields. Even Cheap Jacob shut up his shop out of respect to the feeling of gloom and solemnity that hung over the little village. Two men had ventured out to Gallows Hill in the afternoon, and cautiously approached the scene of the last night's tragedy. It wore its usual quiet aspect—nothing to recall the wild events

of a few hours previous, save the blackened remnants of the pine-torches that had illuminated the scene.

Hearing a low moan proceed from the undergrowth not far off, they plucked up courage after a while to approach the place from whence the sound issued, and found a new-made grave, and seated upon it Harriet, the half-idiot sister of Neil Griffin. She was swaying her body back and forth with low, monotonous moans. When she heard the crackling of footsteps on the dry leaves, she looked up with a wild glance, saw the two men approaching, and bounded off like a startled deer.

“God be with us!” ejaculated one of the men, “if the old woman, and Gabe, and the gal ain’t been and buried the body by themselves! Comrade, I’ll never set foot on this yer hill ag’in as long as life’s in my body—no, not to shoot the fattest deer that ever drunk at Block-house Spring.”

Various were the conjectures that day as to what Captain Brown had meant by that emphatic proclamation of Neil Griffin’s innocence. It was the general impression that it was intended merely to put an instant stop to the proceedings; and in trying, as the Captain did, to save the young man’s life, it was believed that he was actuated by his love for Milly and his desire to spare her pain. If the act required apology, his daughter’s illness and danger procured him abundant forgiveness and sympathy.

There was not a heart in the village that did not bleed for little Milly. The women would have hastened to her bedside with herbs and roots enough to fill her chamber, had not her pale, dignified father kept them at bay. She was better, but she must see no one. “She

must have no excitement," he said, politely but firmly. Since, in addition to his many other qualifications, he had the reputation of being something of a physician, his right to exclude visitors was not questioned, and Milly was left to his care and that of the old black attendant.

Two old women who had sat up later than usual discussing the exciting events of the day over their knitting, reported that when they retired, about ten o'clock, they saw a light burning in Captain Brown's house, which was somewhat isolated from the other buildings, being situated farther down the bayou and quite near the water's edge. One of these remarked to the other:

"The Captain is sitting up with poor Milly to-night. He'd better have let us see her, and given her some black-root tea. Nothing like black-root tea for fits. This trouble will make it go hard with her."

But the villagers slept soundly that night—so soundly that they did not hear the roar and crackle of fire. They did not wake when the red, wreathing blaze mounted higher and higher and wrapped Captain Brown's dwelling in a sheet of flame. Not until the roof fell with a crash that set the village dogs to baying did it rouse them from their slumbers, and bring them out to see what was the matter. Then, with loaded guns—for their first thought was Indians—they ran to the spot. The house was a mass of fire; no human being was to be seen around the ruins. They called; they shouted the names of Captain Brown and Milly; but only the echoes gave response. Could it be Indians? No; there was no print of a moccasin to be discovered; and the Captain's horse stood in his stable, snorting in furious fright at the roaring flames. Had the fire been the work of Indians, they

would have taken the horse. What, then, had become of Captain Brown, Milly, and the old black woman? Could they have been burned to death in the blazing house? The settlers looked at each other in dumb horror.

"I'm afeared so," said one at last. "Milly was sick, you know, and like as not out of her head; and the Cap'n and the old woman war tired out a-waitin' on her, and had dropped to sleep likely, and the candle got upset, and the bed and room took fire, and pretty nigh stifled 'em before they woke. Smoke blinded and choked 'em so they couldn't unfasten the door, or find it, maybe. I've known the like to happen."

This was accepted as the most reasonable solution of the matter; and when the fire, which was long in burning because of the heavy logs of which the house was built, had at last burned down, the villagers proceeded sadly to search among the embers for the remains of the unfortunate family. A few bones and a small mass of charred and blackened flesh was all that could be discovered. These were buried near the spot, amid the profound sorrow and gloom of the little community. The grave had thus seemed to set its seal of silence upon these as well as upon Neil Griffin, and the family, who from circumstances, as well as from their own marked individuality, might have set their stamp upon the young civilization just unfolding in that portion of the Western world, had thus disappeared from the eyes of all.

CHAPTER III.

A TWILIGHT at once somber and magnificent: in the west, a cloud, black with thunder and tempest, shaped like an ill-omened bird, with huge wings gradually broadening and darkening along the horizon; overhead, an expanse of silver-blue sky flecked with fleecy clouds that yet hold the purple and amber of sunset; in the east, a moon rising full-orbed and bright above the line of woods, and lighting luridly the darkness opposite.

The three occupants of the substantial close carriage look upon the scene with different emotions. The gentleman beside the lady on the back seat is thinking that the cloud may contain sharp lightning, which may startle his new horses and occasion a fright to his delicate, city-bred young bride. The lady leans out and looks toward the moonrise, the light shining on her lovely features; then, she glances at the mass of rising cloud, soon to eclipse this brightness, and murmurs:

“It is like fate—evil fate, that overtakes one even when life seems brightest.”

She sighs softly as she speaks, and her eyes take on a dreamy look. The man who sits opposite, and who watches her rather than the scene, wonders at the cloud of sadness that comes over her face. He has noticed that it has thus come and passed many times during the day, and that her eyes have worn the troubled look of a sleep-walker on the point of awaking. But no one else of the gay dinner company has noticed it—not even her husband. She has made an effort to fulfill public expectation, raised to its utmost in respect to the bride of the

mayor of their town and their State senator in prospective. She has dispensed her smiles lavishly, played, sung, and conversed with an affability that has charmed her husband's friends and constituents; but all the while an undefinable shadow has seemed to hang over her. She has seemed to move as one in a dream—to wonder at herself, and to shudder as she felt a stirring of strange memories, bewildering her brain. So she has pleaded fatigue, and induced her attentive husband to take her away before the beginning of the dance that is to close the day's festivities, in spite of the importunities of host and hostess. Colonel Archer has chosen to accompany them also, notwithstanding Mr. Avery's offer to send the carriage back for him. Colonel Archer is such excellent company, he dances so well, and is altogether so agreeable, that many bright eyes look disappointed as he passes out in company with the Averys, with the lady's light shawl across his arm. He is known to be staying at Mr. Avery's house on a visit, and it is rumored that he is a wealthy land speculator, with thoughts of making the thrifty and growing town of Alluvia his future home.

Mr. Avery, with all his watchful fondness for his bride, has not noticed the strange fits of abstraction that have come over her to-day. He is not wont to be observant of small or hidden things, and is himself so frank and open that he rarely looks beyond the surface. Not so his new friend, Colonel Archer; so it was he who now said to Mrs. Avery:

“You speak earnestly for one so young and fortunate, madam. What can you know about evil fate?”

It was doubtful if she heard him, for her eyes still

kept that vacant, fascinated gaze at the cloudy distance. At any rate, before she replied, a tongue of flame leaped from the cloud and a growl of thunder followed. Mr. Avery glanced apprehensively at his wife; then he spoke to the driver on the box:

“Drive faster, Patrick; I am afraid the storm will overtake us. See here—isn’t that a nearer way?” pointing to an old and unused road that led straight over a high hill a few yards distant, while the main track ran off in what seemed a needlessly wide and out-of-the-way curve. The driver stopped and hesitated.

“Yes, sir, it’s some nearer,” he said at last; “but—”

“Take it, then, and drive on. It was a good road when I traveled it not long since.”

The man obeyed, but with evident reluctance. As they ascended the hill, a building loomed up to sight among the trees and undergrowth—a dark, weather-stained building, unshapely and windowless, save for the few loop-holes pierced in its sides. It was set upon huge log posts, that were thickly wound with wild vines. Its proportions were dwarfed by an enormous live-oak that rose near its wide-spreading limbs hung with the long, gray moss.

“Look, Melicent!” said Mr. Avery. “You complained that our new State had no monuments—no houses with histories. Here is a building that has a history dark enough for romance. The ground about it has drunk human blood in other days, both civilized and savage. It has had its share of murder and mystery, too. Looks a fit place for ghosts, does it not?”

There was no response. He turned his head and looked at his wife. He was at once filled with concern

at sight of her singular appearance. Her face was marble in the moonlight ; her eyes were directed toward the old building with a fixed, frightened stare—her lips apart.

“Melicent, what is the matter? Are you ill?”

Still no answer. They were now opposite the block-house, nearly within the shadow of the live-oak tree. The horses suddenly stopped, snorted, and began to prance. The driver declared, with an oath, that it was “jist what he ixpected.” But Mr. Avery did not hear him ; he was engrossed by the strange appearance of his wife. He called her again—tenderly, anxiously—and laid his hand on her arm, escaping white and bare, except for the bracelet that bound it, from her gossamer shawl. She started at length, like one just aroused from nightmare, drew in her breath with a frightened, sobbing sound, and buried her face in her hands. He looked at her in wondering distress. He saw her frame quiver, as if inwardly convulsed by emotion.

“Melicent, my darling!” he exclaimed, “what is it? You distress me beyond measure.”

She lifted her face.

“Pardon me,” she said, in a low voice, full of suppressed agitation. “I—I have had a singular vision. I think I am not well. I thought I saw—a man hanging to that limb of the live-oak ; and—oh ! so many more terrible things besides ! And they were so real ! Aleck, they seemed like remembrances of what I had seen.”

“My dear Melicent, you are feverish. We must hasten home. Patrick, why do you not drive on? What is the matter with the horses?”

“Shure, and they don’t like ghosts, sir, any more than mesilf. They see what the madam saw jist now—Neil

Griffin hanging to yon limb. That's what comes o' going by haunted places."

"Neil Griffin? Neil—" uttered Melicent.

She shuddered and drew herself away from her husband's arms. Her eyes turned without again, fixed in that trance-like stare, as though some image, invisible to the others, rose before her.

"Hush, you superstitious humbug, and give the horses the lash! Don't you see the rain is beginning to fall?" cried Mr. Avery.

A sharp peal of thunder seemed to break the spell. The horses bounded forward; Melicent withdrew her eyes, with a deep, shuddering breath, and sat quite silent and composed, with her husband's arm around her and her head resting lightly against his shoulder. At length she said:

"What man was it he spoke of as being hanged on that tree? Tell me all about it."

"Not now," replied her husband; "you are too much agitated."

"I am quite composed, and I should like to hear all about it. It would interest me."

"There was a man hanged there once, in the first settling of this place—eight or ten years ago, I believe—for the murder of a miner, who had a large amount of money. The murder was committed under that very tree."

"There were two men hanged on that tree—father and son," said Colonel Archer's deep voice. "It is nearly nine years since the last, Neil Griffin, was swung to the very limb Mrs. Avery pointed out. Doubtless, madam," he said, turning to her with a short, dry laugh, "it was his ghost you saw. It is supposed to haunt this

place and guard the treasure he is said to have buried here."

"Me own feyther saw the ghost, standing by its own grave one night—shure and he did!" broke out Patrick, unable to contain himself longer—"standing by the very grave his mither, the old witch-woman Hagar, made for him in the bush yonder."

"Is he buried here?" asked Mrs. Avery.

"It is supposed that he is. There is a grave in the thicket yonder, made by his mother and brother, and he is *supposed* to lie in it."

"Supposed?" echoed Mr. Avery; "it is known that he is buried there."

"If he was buried at all—if he was hanged at all—"

"He was hanged, of course; I have heard all about it frequently."

"He was cut down by his wife's father, and left with the crazy beldame his mother. Where is the proof of his death?"

"Certainly, he was dead. He has never turned up in all these years, and there is his grave."

"A grave is no sign of a body. But we will leave the subject; it affects Mrs. Avery's nerves. Mrs. Avery, you looked as pale as a specter yourself just now, in that flash of lightning. See, madam, the cloud is about to engulf the moon—the dark fate to overtake the proud life, before it has reached the zenith of its glory, to recall your comparison of a moment ago."

She did not reply. She was thinking. Was it ominous? Was her feeling about it prophetic? Only yesterday her life had seemed so entirely bright! What was this strange, weird shadow that had crept over it?

The brief summer storm had spent its fury when they reached the door of Mr. Avery's dwelling. The clouds were parting and flying off in the fresh wind, revealing the serene heaven with its moon and stars. Mr. Avery lifted his wife across the damp pavement, and, setting her down upon the steps of the porch, enjoined upon her to retire at once, while he took a look at the stable and smoked a cigar.

Up stairs she went, but not to bed. Exchanging her silk dinner-dress for a white wrapper, she went to her favorite room, the library, and sat down in the open window, that the night-wind might cool her heated brain, and give her chance for quiet, coherent thought.

But she could not think at all—she could only remember. She was like one suddenly raised from the dead, to whom the life he has lived in the past comes up in wave after wave of recollection, threatening to drown reason in the flood of memories. But Melicent's present experience was more bewildering than this, because more complicated. She had the feeling of double identity. She remembered herself as Melicent Weir, a girl accustomed to refined associations and elegant surroundings during all her life, the earlier recollections of which, however, had been clouded and partially obliterated by a dangerous brain-fever that had necessitated her leaving school and retiring to a country retreat to recover her health. Her first distinct remembrance was of this place, and of an old-fashioned bedroom with chintz curtains and mahogany furniture—herself seated by the great window in a deep-cushioned invalid's chair; her father stately and handsomely dressed in black on one side, holding her hands; on the other, a benignant old lady, whose dress

and face seemed to belong to some courtly portrait of a past age. Glancing at an oval mirror opposite, she saw and wondered at herself—a slim, pale-faced child, with hair cropped close and turning in short rings over her head. She made an effort to recall some circumstance previous to the present, but her mind seemed in a haze, and her recollections were dim and confused until her father helped out her impaired memory by telling her how ill she had been—how she had been obliged to give up school for several months, and been nursed by her aunt in her home among the mountains. Now, however, she must get well rapidly, and return to her studies. He would take her this time to a convent school, as the sisters would be careful of her health. She remembered how patiently her father had answered her bewildered questions and corrected her vague impressions, which he had gravely smiled at, telling her they were only the dreams of her delirium, and not, as she half fancied, recollections of what had actually occurred. Then came the return to her city home; the life at the convent for four monotonous but happy years, varied by vacations and glimpses into city life; the completion of her course of study at the convent; her entrance into society, where she speedily became the belle of her circle, admired and followed, with many to worship the subtile charm about her that was more attractive than her beauty. Finally came a suitor favored by her father before his manly yet tender devotion had won upon her young imagination—a live man of the West, full of practical talent, energy, and courage, and bidding fair to distinguish himself in public life. Following quickly upon his brief, earnest wooing, came their marriage and removal to his Western

home, in a town that had risen in a few years from a mere handful of log-houses to a thriving young city—a rapidity of growth characteristic of American towns when favorably situated on railroads or water-courses.

Such were the prominent outlines of her past life that Melicent ran rapidly over in thought, as a contradiction of, a defense against, *another set of recollections* that pressed upon her with such bewildering, such maddening vividness—a panorama of changing scenes in a different and far lower social sphere, in each of which she seemed to see herself—another self—far different from the Melicent Avery of to-night, yet felt to be the same. She saw herself—a wild, untutored child of poverty—tramping barefoot through tangled woods, or riding bareback by her father's side in the hunt. She saw herself, a child still, but a wife loving and beloved, happy as a queen, in her log-cabin; fishing and hunting with her young husband; working in the field with him; holding the boards for him that he nailed on the house he was building—the house she was proud of, because it would have two rooms and a porch in front, where she might train her wild jasmynes and traveler's delight.

Breaking upon the scenes of careless, childlike content, came that dark event whose memory (so vividly brought up by the sight of the block-house and the "Gallows Tree") had smitten, it seemed by an electric shock, a whole chain of paralyzed recollection into activity—the murder of the miner, the accusal of her husband, the lynching, the wild midnight ride through the woods, the terrible last scene of all, where a struggling form had shot up to sight, swinging from a limb of the "Gallows Tree" in the lurid torchlight.

What did it all mean? Were these real memories, or was she laboring under some terrible delusion? She recollected now that some of these scenes had come to her in sudden, dim flashes often before, and she had spoken of them to her father, who had replied that they were only dreams or illusions of the brain.

What suggested them to her to-day? Oh! she remembered now: it was the sight of a man's face—a man they had met on their way to the dinner-party—coming out of the woods with a gun on his shoulder. He had looked up shyly as they passed, and showed a sun-browned face and great, dark eyes, in which a frightened, deprecating look was singularly blended with a fierce expression. It was this face that had seemed to unseal some scroll of remembrance in her brain that had gradually unrolled itself, fold by fold, during that painful day. Where did that face fix itself in this scroll of memory? It seemed that it had belonged to her husband's brother—the husband of this mysterious second self—of this child-wife, whose young brain, it appeared, had given way at sight of her husband hanging from the gallows.

Had this really been herself, or was she going mad? Oh! if she could but see her father! Surely he would solve for her this dreadful mystery.

She rose and walked the room with rapid steps, and hands clasped before her. Neil—Neil Griffin! She stopped, as the name she had heard from Colonel Archer recurred to her mind. Neil! Surely the name had a sound of familiar tenderness in it. Could it be that she—proud, dainty Melicent—had ever loved, ever married that rough, illiterate son of toil—that man of whom her new-found memory-stores held a picture, in coarse shirt-

sleeves and fox-skin cap? Had his lips ever pressed hers?—had her head ever rested on his breast, while his eyes— But here the picture grew suddenly luminous with the light of large, sad, earnest eyes, whose smile—

“Melicent!”

It was her husband’s voice at the door. She started guiltily. She felt a burning flush come to her brow as she turned to the door where he stood.

“Melicent, you up yet! I thought you had gone to bed half an hour ago.”

“If I had, I should not have been able to sleep. To lie down would only make me more restless. I will just read or walk off my nervousness here alone, Aleck, and come to bed when I feel more quiet. Don’t let me keep you up.”

With his good-night kiss warm upon her lips, she sat down again by the window, to think of that other husband—dream-husband, could it be?—who had loved and kissed her first, and who slept in a felon’s grave in the thicket that covered the slope of Gallows Hill. Did he sleep there of a surety? The thought brought up another puzzle to her already bewildered brain. Why had Colonel Archer expressed that doubt of Neil Griffin’s death? “If he was buried at all—if he was hanged at all,” he had said; and then directly afterward, “A grave is no proof of a body.”

What had he meant? His tone, his manner intimated that he knew more than his words expressed. And how came he to know so much about the details, the date of the murder, when he had been in the place but a week?—so much more about it than did her husband, who had been living in the town for years?

"There is some secret about it," said Melicent to herself. As the thought came into her mind, she glanced down from the window where she sat—an upper window—and saw Colonel Archer standing on the piazza below, leaning against a vine-clad pillar at the farther extremity, and smoking a cigar, his fine profile distinctly outlined in the moonlight against the background of dark-green leaves. With a swift impulse to question him concerning the mystery that tortured her, she rose and hurried down stairs, not stopping to think of the strangeness of her seeking him at such an hour, until she was quite near him. Then she wavered, paused a moment, but finally approached him with a slower and more hesitating step. He did not see her apparently—did not move until she had glided to his side. Then he turned quickly.

"I startled you," she said timidly.

"A little. I heard a rustle, but thought it might be the wing of a passing angel; it is such a heavenly night."

"You are quite mistaken, you find."

"Not so far wrong after all. You look like a spirit in that white robe and with that white face—too white, Mrs. Avery. Have you not yet recovered from your fright?"

"I am nervous and could not sleep. I thought of walking off my restlessness, and seeing you on the piazza, I came out."

He tossed his cigar off among the flower-beds.

"Shall we not walk, then?" he said. "I, too, am restless. Shall we pace the garden-walk until the drowsy god is propitiated? The scent of the night-blooming jasmine is alluring."

Melicent hesitated, as he bent his tall figure over her.

"I think not," she answered. "We will sit here awhile. To tell the truth, I came here to ask a question. You have excited my curiosity."

"About what?"

"The block-house murder. Tell me all about it."

"Oh! no more of that to-night. It is not good to sup on horrors. You will come down to-morrow with dark rings under your lovely eyes."

"I shall, if you doom me to sleeplessness because of ungratified curiosity," she said, forcing a lightness she was far from feeling. "Be kind and tell me the story."

"I have done so already, in a great measure. What is it that especially arouses in you the feeling of mother Eve?"

"Two things: *your* interest in the matter, and the doubt you implied of the—the murderer's being dead."

"I will tell you on condition of your repaying the favor by letting me know the secret of *your* interest in the matter."

"Have I not told you it was woman's curiosity?"

"Permit me to doubt it. I have judged you to be singularly wanting in curiosity. I have known you a week, and I can usually read a woman through in half that time."

"Ah! but my book of character has some pages you have skipped. There are some leaves that are folded down."

"I believe you," he answered in a low tone, searching her face with eyes that made her shrink; "and believe *me*, madam, I shall make it my task to unfold these leaves and read the secrets they contain."

His look, his voice, made her shiver with a passing feeling of dread. He saw it and smiled.

"Sit down," he said, "here, where I can see your face in the moonlight. I will relieve your curiosity in brief. My interest in the murder is told in a few words. The murdered man was *my father*."

"Your father?"

"Even so. At the time of the murder he was returning home, after an absence of twelve years. He had left it, a bankrupt man, determined to retrieve his fortunes in the land of gold. He wrote to my mother occasionally, and on these letters she lived, for she loved him with a good woman's single-hearted devotion. At last he wrote that he was on the eve of returning home; that he had amassed a fortune in gold and large diamonds, which he carried skillfully concealed about his person. It was the last we heard of him. After two more years of anxious waiting, my mother died, heart-sick of hope deferred. On her death-bed she made me promise that I would find out my father's fate. In pursuance of this object, I went to California as soon as I could arrange my business. I have spent four years since then in trying to discover what became of my father. Six months ago I gained a clew. I traced him here, and found that he had been murdered eight years before. I am here a second time. Can you guess my object?"

She shook her head faintly.

"It is to find the murderer—to avenge my father's death."

"Was he not avenged at the time? Was not the man hanged?"

"That brings us to your second subject of curiosity.

Yes, the man was hanged, but life was not extinct. I am sure of that. He was cut down, you remember, by the father of his wife. I am confident that he was restored to life by the old woman, his mother. His burial was a sham to cover his restoration and flight. I believe he still lives."

"What is your reason for thinking so?"

"I have more than one reason. In the first place, the suspicion occurred to me immediately upon hearing how the murderer was cut down from the gallows, and how secretly he had been buried. Then I determined to sound the members of his family who are still living here. They are distrustful and cunning, and shy as foxes, and to get any clew from them was a hard matter; but they had no suspicion of me, and by ingenious cajolery at last I succeeded in gaining a part of the information I wanted from one of the females of the family—the murderer's sister, in fact—a weak-minded creature, so shy that it was only by cunning manœuvring that I succeeded in getting to speak to her alone. I can't begin to tell you how I managed to disarm all suspicion and induce her to tell me what she did—namely, that she had seen her brother (his ghost, she said) the night after his supposed burial, and had heard her mother tell him to go to his uncle in San Antonio. She had waked up, she said, in the middle of the night, and heard whispering voices in her mother's room. She had crept in unperceived, and found that her mother was talking to her brother's *ghost* in the closet. She seemed to be very angry with the ghost for not wanting to go away until he had seen his wife. The old woman opened the closet-door soon afterward, and the girl saw, by the faint fire-

light that streamed in, the '*ghost*' sitting in a chair with its face buried in its hands. This was all she saw or heard, for the old woman discovered her and beat her severely for meddling with '*unearthly things*,' as she called it. Afterward, to still further assure myself, I dug into the pretended grave on Gallows Hill, and found—what, think you?—a moldy crutch, wrapped in a rag of flannel petticoat—a jest of the old crone's upon the would-be executioners, whom she had frightened off by her curses and her reputation for witchcraft."

"Did you make this discovery lately?"

"It was at my previous visit. Since then I have been to San Antonio, on the hint given by the girl; but the scent was either a cold one or a wrong one altogether, and I am here again on track of the prey that I mean to hunt down if there is a possible chance in this world—the wretch, who deprived me of father, mother, and fortune."

"Surely it is not likely he is about here?"

"Since I have told you so much, I may as well tell you all, though I know it is not a wise thing to confide secret business to a woman. I have never spoken of it to any other person besides a detective—not even to Avery. You see what confidence I have in your discretion. To reply to your question—yes, I do think it likely, and more than likely, that the man I seek is about here, and that he has come to this place since I left here—probably for the first time since his flight. I have no proof of this, but I have reasons almost as conclusive to my own mind.

"In the first place, his near relatives are here, and persons of his class cling to those of their own blood, and

may be safely calculated to come back and hang around them, if they have been driven away. Then it is a remarkable fact, as shown in police reports, that criminals exhibit a propensity for revisiting the scenes of their crimes. There seems to be some kind of fascination drawing them to the spot, at the risk of discovery and punishment. Perhaps it is *Nemesis*.

“But you will say these are mere general probabilities; here is one more particular: On my return here, I again approached the girl Harriet; but, though I did so even more cunningly than before, I found her entirely changed. She would not say a word about her brother; she even denied having seen him (or his ghost) the night after he was hung; it had been nothing but a dream, she said; she always had the nightmare after eating cat-fish for supper; and this denial of having beheld his ‘ghost’ was almost conclusive to me that she had since seen him and knew him to be alive, and was therefore on her guard—had no doubt been put so by her mother.”

“Are these all your reasons?”

“Not quite; I believe I have seen the man myself.”

“Seen him! When?—where?”

“Good heavens! Mrs. Avery, do not look around so wildly; are you afraid of his rising up like the ghost of Banquo? I only wish he would; man or ghost, I would have him *then*, and he should never cheat the gallows again.”

“You said you saw him.”

“I said I thought I had seen him. It was only two nights ago. I have been in the habit of going out at night and watching around the Griffin habitation for any

suspicious appearances. This cabin is some two miles down the river, upon the outskirts of the former settlement that was here, called Bear's Bend. I was on my way there when I saw this man. It was near the place where had stood the house in which Mrs. Griffin and her father were burned up the night after Griffin was lynched. Did I not tell you of this circumstance? The place is not far from the cabin of the old witch, and is grown up in young cottonwood-trees. By one of these the man was standing, his hat drawn over his face. But for this, and the shadow of the cottonwood, I could have distinguished his features, for I crouched quite near in the undergrowth. I saw him wipe his eyes twice on the sleeve of the old coat he wore, and heard him groan aloud. It was this circumstance that more than half convinced me I had found the man of my search."

"Why should this convince you?"

"Do you not see? He had visited the place where his wife had perished; he was standing on the spot where her remains were buried; he had loved her devotedly, it seems, and they say had committed the murder for her sake, that he might have money to spend upon her and to propitiate her father. It could have been no other man who had visited that place—that grave—at dead of night, to weep and groan over the lost love and happiness of which they reminded him. As the thought flashed upon me, I trembled with joy."

"Joy!—my God, for what?"

"Because I had found him. Ah! madam, you must not measure my feelings by yours. I had no pity for the wretch. I saw only the hand that had struck my gray-haired father to the dust. I crept nearer—I crouched

like a panther to spring upon him, when a dead branch broke under my foot. He turned and saw the shaking bushes, and ran rapidly out of sight through the undergrowth in the direction of the river. I sprang to my feet and followed with all my speed, but could see nothing of him. I spent an hour in searching in all directions, but in vain. Since then I have not relaxed in vigilance, with the exception of to-night, when a clever detective watches in my place. I have a hope that I shall yet succeed in tracking the murderer to his den, and visiting upon him the long-averted vengeance. Will you not wish me success?"

She had found it impossible to bear the scrutiny of his eyes as he proceeded with his story. She drew back and leaned her face against the balustrade in the friendly shadow of the vines, and dropped the trembling lids over her eyes. She did not speak for a moment; then she said, slowly:

"Hanged as a felon until he had all the pain and shame of such a death; bereaved of all he cared for; an outcast for more than eight years; a lonely, stricken man, stealing out at night and haunting the grave of his dead happiness—is not that retribution sufficient? Leave further vengeance to God."

He laughed scornfully.

"You talk like a soft-hearted woman," he said. "What will become of us if our State decides on giving the right of office-holding to women? What judges they would make! We should be overrun with pardoned criminals. Any one who could get up a few sentimental tears and groans would be sure of acquittal—especially if a man. Mrs. Avery, I would not spare the murderer of

my father, not if he offered me his weight in diamonds as large as those he robbed me of. I would rather my right eye were cut from its socket than have it lose its chance of seeing the noose fastened around his neck—fastened so securely that it would not fail the second time, as it did the first. I see you are shocked. It may be I am a savage; perhaps it is a fault of association; yet I love soft and gentle things—moonlight and flowers like these, and fair beauty like yours. If the fates make me a bandit, as is not improbable, I will have a bride gentle as Conrad's Medora, hid away in some lone Mexican ranch—tender-eyed, lily-white, with soft, round arms that would adorn the diamonds I would encircle them with—as yours do. By the way, what large diamonds you have in that bracelet of yours! a present from *cher mari*, I suppose?"

"No, from my father; they are family jewels," said Melicent half absently. Then she looked up and caught the glance of his bold, black eyes, and rose uneasily. "It is late," she said; "I will not keep you up any longer. I thank you for your compliance with my request. One more favor—will you keep me advised if anything new is discovered in this matter? You are always sure of my interest."

"And of your secrecy? I shall depend upon that. I told you through your own solicitation, remember. A foolish thing, though, it was to make a confidante of a married woman; of course regarding her husband as part of herself, after the orthodox fashion of devoted wives."

He bowed his head before her with that mocking curve on his mustached lip. He had risen and stood di-

rectly in her way, his look and manner demanding an answer to his request for secrecy. She stood still, hesitating a moment; then she said:

"I will say nothing of what you have told me to Mr. Avery, although I think, instead of marring your plans, he would be apt to give you efficient help—in the way of shrewd counsel, at least."

He ignored her last suggestion.

"All right," he said; "so it is a secret between us. I shall keep you posted in regard to all that is done or may happen."

Before Melicent slept that night she wrote to her father. She felt that he alone could throw light upon this strange experience. It was no use to confide it to her husband. After all, the seeming reality of remembrance might only be the chimera of an unhealthy brain. She had studied psychology; she knew something of the singular freaks of the human consciousness—the remarkable phenomena of the mind in abnormal conditions. She would do nothing until she heard from her father. Her letter to him was brief, but every word was freighted with earnestness. She described to him her singular awakening to what seemed another identity—to remembrances of a life she had lived previous to her recollection hitherto.

"Either these are real," she wrote, "or I am going mad. Tell me, my father, I conjure you, as you would save me from the fate of a maniac! My brain can not stand it. Rest, peace, coherent thought, are impossible. Anything is better than this doubt and bewilderment. Write immediately; let me know the truth. The truth must come at last—better now than when my health and

mind have given way under the effort to penetrate this mystery."

She said nothing of Colonel Archer's supposition that Neil Griffin was alive. There seemed no necessity for doing this; time enough to grapple with this new source of uneasiness when it was proved to be true. What she wanted now, what she felt she must have, was a solution of her present torturing perplexity. It came with her father's letter, a few days afterward:

"I will tell you the truth, Melicent, since your letter makes it imperative. Only for your sake have I withheld it. I trusted there would be no need of its ever being revealed to you. I hoped you would never awake to recollections of such a painful nature; but you have done so, and therefore, to relieve you from doubt and bewilderment that might affect your reason, I will tell you all, and confirm the truth of these new impressions. Yes, these recollections that have suddenly awakened are true. You were indeed the wife of that criminal who perished on the gallows. The sight of him, hanging there, threw you into convulsions, which lasted until next day, when your little lifeless child was born, with none present but old Margaret and myself. You were unconscious at its birth. When the convulsions left you, I administered a powerful opiate, and you sank into a deep sleep. I knew enough about such things to be aware that you would probably not be in your right mind when you awoke. I knew that when convulsions take place under these circumstances, they are usually followed by a condition of temporary derangement called 'puerperal mania,' which, though not dangerous, lasts sometimes for months. But

this knowledge did not deter me from my resolve to go away and take you with me. I did not mean to stay or to have you remain a day longer at a place where the only associations were of pain and disgrace. I had *other reasons* for wishing to leave at once. My endeavor to save Neil Griffin from his sentence of death, and my action in cutting him down when I saw him hanging to the tree (actions prompted by my love for you), would, I felt sure, cause me to be suspected of complicity in his crime.

“No step had then been taken against me (no doubt because of sympathy for you), but I knew the fickleness of an excited mob, and I determined to forestall it by escaping in time and leaving no trace behind. I took you asleep on your mattress, and with old Margaret’s assistance carried you out at night—carried you down the bank of the river and placed you in the skiff that Neil had just finished for me. It had a light awning over it, and was large enough to make you comfortable. I then set fire to the house to make it appear that we had perished in the burning building; for I wanted to be dead to all who had known me at Bear’s Bend. I only wished I could tear the memory of my life there for ever from my mind, and begin existence anew!

“Thanks to the strong current and the steady use of the paddle, we were soon far from the hated spot, and in due time reached Fairtown, where I found a small boat on the point of leaving, and transferred you to more comfortable accommodations. This took us to a place whence, by easy staging, we soon reached a station on the railroad, and thence were carried rapidly by steam northward, to the home of a widowed sister of mine

among the mountains. There I stopped until your health was restored. During all this time you had not been rational, though your disorder did not take a violent form. The shock received seemed to have paralyzed your nervous system—benumbed the faculties of your mind. It was weeks before this passed off, and then, to my surprise, and I confess my extreme gratification, I discovered that you had almost entirely lost all recollections of your past life. The shock had nearly obliterated all previous impressions, and I took pains to make you believe that the faint reminiscences that came up were but the recollections of dreams and delirious imaginings. Your marriage had always been a source of mortification and self-blame to me, and I was overjoyed that the remembrance of it was destroyed, and that you could enter upon a new life of culture and refinement with no clog on your freedom of thought and feeling—no burden of bitter memories. It has been my sole happiness to see how happy *you* were in this new life—how well you were suited to the higher social station, the graces and privileges which successful speculation enabled me to bestow upon you. I thought the memory of the old time forever blotted from your mind, and, when you were happily married, I gave myself no further uneasiness concerning it.

“I blame myself here for one great oversight: it never occurred to me that your husband’s Western home might possibly be situated on or near that fateful place we left, and that the sight of familiar objects might bring to life torpid memories in your mind. If this had occurred to me, I should never have permitted you to go with him there. That his home was in the same State

where we had lived was sufficiently annoying to me ; but it was 'in a new town,' with a name unfamiliar to me, which I never supposed could occupy the same locality as the little settlement of Bear's Bend. It appears strange that I should have been so unthoughtful as not to inquire into this ; it seems as though the hand of fate were in it—fate that has so often risen unexpectedly in my path and dashed my cup to the ground. Had not the sight of familiar objects at that place stirred the stagnant tide of memory, your life might have glided peacefully away, with no thought of the dark depths that lay under the sparkling present.

“Now, my dearly loved daughter, I have told you the secret of your former life ; let it be hid in your breast for ever. It is your secret *and mine*—divulge it not to another, least of all to your husband. To reveal it to him would be to strike a death-blow to your wedded happiness. It would also make him lose the great confidence he has in me, for he might not understand the motive of affection that prompted me to conceal your past life from you. It would diminish his love for you to know that the heart he has won, as he thought, in its freshness, had in reality passed through the sweet and bitter experiences of womanhood. Then, too, he is human, and in his disappointment he would hardly believe that you had been ignorant of these things ; he would suspect that you, as well as I, had intentionally deceived him, and only acknowledged the imposition when he was securely won. I tell you these hard probabilities that you may see how right it is in me to command you, as you value my love and your own happiness, not to confess the secret of your past life to your husband, as I know your frank nature

impels you to do. Keep your own counsel, and all will be well.

“My child, it may be I have done you a wrong by this concealment. If so, forgive me. It was done for your sake. I have lived but for you. I begin to fear I have done you a wrong.”

“A wrong indeed—a fearful, an irreparable wrong, my father!” were Melicent’s words, as she dropped the letter and the nerveless hand that held it down by her side. “You have laid a burden upon my life that can never be lifted. I can never feel free and happy again. I can never meet my husband’s look frankly and honestly again. O God! if this knowledge had only come before I married him!”

She mused awhile, and a tender thought welled up into her heart.

“And my poor little baby was dead,” she said softly. “Was it left behind? Was its little body consumed in the burning house without my ever having seen it—ever having kissed its poor lips?”

At the thought of the dead child she had never seen, she began to weep—a gush of tears that cleared her brain and brought relief to her overwrought feelings.

CHAPTER IV.

IN the confused whirl of thought and feeling that kept Melicent sleepless through the night that followed the reading of her father’s letter, one thought came per-

sistently to the surface—that Neil Griffin was probably still alive. Her father's letter had not made mention of any such probability. He could not have entertained it surely, else he had not permitted her to marry Mr. Avery; and yet a doubt of his integrity obstinately thrust itself into Melicent's consciousness. A shadow of suspicion had lately darkened her half-worshiping trust in her father. He had clearly been wrong in this business. He had erred, doubtless, through motives of affection for and pride in her; but she felt a melancholy conviction that his act had put a lasting barrier between herself and the free and honest enjoyment of life. In her marriage relation, she must bear for ever the guilt of concealment—the burden of secrecy—so foreign to her nature. And to this must be added the dread of discovery—the haunting fear of the *dénoûement* which must take place if Neil Griffin should be alive, and if his relation to her should come to light. Then she recalled Colonel Archer's almost savage eagerness to ferret out and drag to punishment this murderer of his father. Would he succeed? Was it likely, as he believed, that Neil Griffin was near at hand—concealing himself somewhere in the vicinity of his old home? How would it affect her if she knew that he was taken—that he would be executed and justice be satisfied at last? Would it indeed be justice? She remembered how fully the girl Milly had believed in the innocence of her husband. Now, as she looked back through the newly opened vista of memory, and the details of the murder came to her one by one, she saw reason to retract her trust. Who else could have committed the deed? Why did Neil refuse to give up the name of the murderer, whom he admitted that he had seen? What rea-

son could he have had for persisting in the refusal when his life was in such fearful danger? It must have been a mere subterfuge. "He was, he must have been guilty," Melicent thought; yet how clear and steadfast his eyes had looked into hers when he asserted his innocence! "And," whispered Memory, "how sad and tender they were when they rested upon you in that last interview!" Then she remembered Archer's words—that the man had committed the deed for the sake of his wife—"to get money to spend on her and make a lady of her." It must have been so. She recollected how eager he was to make money, that he might render her more comfortable, and give her some of those luxuries and "pretty things" that her fancy seemed to delight in. She recalled her own bitter, discontented expression on the night when the miner had shown her the diamonds and gold ornaments. And the remembrance of all this brought a feeling of remorse—a pitying interest—it may be, also, a revival of something of the old tenderness, that ended in overpowering her personal distress and giving birth to a determination that, if possible, she would warn Neil Griffin that he was in danger, and help him to find safety in flight. She would do this regardless of her implied promise to Colonel Archer. She had given no direct pledge of silence, only as regarded her husband; and if she had, she could not let it interfere with the feeling that seemed now to bind her as a solemn duty—to save the man who had been her husband, and whose crime, if crime he had committed, lay in part at her door. But how should she warn him? How should she see him? How could she ever find where he was, if indeed he still lived?

With a vague impulse—the offspring more of unrest

than of hope—she determined to see old Hagar, and talk to her, not letting her, of course, know who she was. She was in the habit of riding on horseback, accompanied by her husband. She would not want him to go with her to-day, and it was fortunate that he had ridden out into the country on business. Colonel Archer, too, had gone away—quite early, it seemed, for he was not present at the breakfast-table. Melicent ordered her horse to be brought, and put on her riding-habit with hands that trembled with nervous excitement. As she fastened her hat, she looked into the mirror and studied her full-length reflection for a moment. Would they know her?—especially this shrewd old woman, who was Neil's mother, and whom she had so feared in times past, yet who had more than once been kind to her in sickness and in other troubles incident to a motherless girlhood? She remembered herself as she had looked in the little round shaving-glass that hung upon a nail in the wall of her log-cabin home nearly eight years ago—the plump round face, short curls, and brown, rosy cheeks. Did the picture bear much resemblance to the one that confronted her now—this stately shaped, fair woman, with her crown of rich hair, darker in hue than it had been in those early days, as her figure was taller and more symmetrical, her expression more intense, and her features more finely molded, through refining influences? Even her eyes had grown deeper and darker, as it seemed, and the brows arched above them were more clearly defined on her high, pale forehead. Add to these points of difference the great change made by dress and manner, and it was clear that Melicent Avery would never be recognized as Milly Griffin.

"No, they would never know me," she said to herself, with a half sigh, as she turned from the mirror, "even if they did not believe me dead, and my bones buried in that neglected mound under the cottonwood-trees."

She was obliged to pass this place on her way to Hagar's cabin. She remembered just where the house had stood. It was wonderful how vivid *now* were her recollections of all those scenes and events of her life that until recently had been sealed in some mysterious vault of memory. They seemed all the fresher from having been so long locked away and suddenly opened by the key furnished by the sight of the block-house and the "Gallows Tree."

She drew the reins of her horse upon the spot that had once been occupied by her former home. Grass and weeds covered it, and a grove of tall young cottonwood-trees rustled mournfully around. She was not long in finding the spot where the few bones that had been gathered up from the ashes of the burned house (supposed to be those of her father and herself) were buried. She saw where the grass had been recently cleared away from the place by a careful hand. Whose hand could it be? She thought of the man seen here by Colonel Archer—the man who had leaned against the tree and groaned so bitterly. It must have been he who had secretly cleared away the weeds from the neglected grave. Who could this be but Neil Griffin?

Melicent rode about the place lingeringly, looking around her and starting excitedly at every rustle in the undergrowth—at the slow swaying of the moss that hung from the old ash-tree that had stood near the door, a part

of whose branches were now leafless and blackened, having been killed by the fire. Once or twice a name rose to her lips that she could scarcely restrain herself from uttering aloud, so strong was the spell of memory upon her. At last she rode away in the direction of Hagar's cabin, which stood but a few hundred yards away, but farther back from the bayou. Its appearance was hardly changed from what she remembered it to have been in times past—only more gray and moss-grown, and crouching more forlornly under the shadow of the great pecan-tree that towered over it. The little end room that Harriet had occupied still had its one window, full of blooming plants of some kind, and beneath it was a plat of gaudy flowers—wild red poppies and hibiscus, blue lilies and flame-colored "pink-root" blossoms—making a patch of bright color that contrasted with the sullen gloom of the place. Here she saw Harriet, seated under the broad, red-shaded leaves of her favorite castor-bean tree, knitting, while she sung a droning song that sounded like the monotonous hum of an insect.

Melicent's eye moved hurriedly around, and soon caught sight of the tall figure of old Hagar. She was standing at the dilapidated fence, with her back to the road, and her large, bony hand shading the sun from her eyes as she looked off over the field toward the dark wall of woods that rose in the distance. Melicent's heart beat quickly with a momentary return of the old feeling of fear with which Neil's fierce mother had been wont to inspire her. "What if she should know me? What if she should suspect me of having sinister designs in coming here? What pretext can I possibly make for stopping to see her?" Luck favored her in the last par-

ticular. A flapping noise attracted her attention; a hoarse, strident cry caused her to start and look quickly down. She saw, in a narrow inclosure by the roadside, a great white bird that she knew must be a swan. Its wings drooped, and some of the feathers were broken and soiled, as it flapped discontentedly in the scanty water contained in a shallow, vat-like receptacle; but the long, arched neck and proudly curved breast were still stately and swan-like. Its melancholy cry excited Melicent's pity. "It is a shame that so beautiful a creature should be penned in this place to pine and die," she thought. "How different it would look in our pretty lawn, swimming in the little pond among the lilies!" And then it flashed upon her that the swan would furnish an excellent excuse for stopping—"to see if it could be bought."

She dismounted at once, and was fastening her horse at the fence, when a large brindled dog, that had been standing at old Hagar's side, turned round and growled fiercely. In an instant he had jumped the fence and flew at her, barking savagely. She shrank back, uttering a scream of terror, expecting the fierce-looking brute to tear her in pieces. But his angry attitude suddenly changed; he stopped barking, and presently his tail began to wag delightedly, and he approached her and thrust his nose against her hand, in token of recognition. It was mutual, for Melicent now recognized him as a dog that had belonged to Neil, that she had fed and petted when a puppy, and hunted squirrels with on many a bright October day. She patted his head, bent down and whispered: "Chowder, good Chowder; yes, I am Milly," feeling a kind of relief in confiding her secret

even to a dumb brute, as did the barber of King Midas, who whispered the secret of his royal master to the betraying reeds of the river. Chowder seemed about to prove nearly as indiscreet a confidant, for he bounded around her, whined, and wagged his tail with such a vehement expression of delight that Melicent feared it would prove betraying.

"Come here, Chowder—come here, you fool! What do you mean?" called out old Hagar in angry astonishment.

Melicent turned, bowed, and said "Good morning," in her politest tones. Then perceiving, from the woman's gruff response, that she would not be invited to go in, she opened the gate herself and entered the yard, with the dog at her side.

"I was riding by," she said, "and saw the pretty captive you have yonder. I wanted to take a nearer look at it—perhaps purchase it, if you are willing to part with it.—Down, dog!—behave, sir!" for Chowder was still bent on expressing his gratification at their meeting.

"Begone, will you!" cried the old woman to the dog. "What's got into you to-day? I never saw you so before; what's turned you to a fool?"

She flourished her crutch, and would have struck him, but Melicent caught her hand.

"Don't hurt him, please; he'll not annoy me any more. Dogs are usually fond of me, and I don't mind their caresses."

"I never knew this one to be fond of a stranger before, except as a bear is fond of a pig. What did you say you wanted?"

"To buy the swan, if you will sell it."

"It's not mine—it's my son's. He shot it at Black Lake and broke its wing. It's likely he'd sell it if he was here."

"He is not at home?"

"No."

There was no encouragement for conversation in the woman's tone, but Melicent was determined. She looked around for Harriet, but the girl had taken flight at the sight of a visitor. The gay little garden-plat had caught her eye. It was but a few yards square, and was inclosed on two sides by a little lattice of split reeds, completely interwoven by delicate cypress-vines, starred all over with crimson flowers.

"How pretty this miniature garden looks in the sunshine!" Melicent said, approaching it; "and those tall scarlet flowers, and spotted lilies and blue flags. Are they all wild flowers?"

"Yes; the girl got them out of the woods. She says they bring the humming-birds and make company for her. I don't care for them myself; I don't want company."

"You have your family: you are not lonely. How many children have you?"

"A son and daughter."

"Only two? Are they all you ever had?"

"I had another son."

"Where is he?"

"He is dead—he was hanged!" cried the woman, her black eyes flashing luridly in their deep sockets. "Yes, he was hanged! That is what you want to hear. You knew it before; you only want to hear what I will say about it for the sake of curiosity and for insult."

"I am a stranger here—I have just come to this town, but I have heard—"

"I know you have. You have heard all about it. That's enough. I won't be insulted by any fine lady that lives. You had better go."

"Oh! believe me, madam," said Melicent, approaching her timidly, and laying her hand upon the woman's arm, "I would not hurt your feelings for anything. I *did* come here for a purpose, but not to injure you or yours. I wanted to speak to you—to tell you—I mean, to ask you about your son."

"I told you my son Gabriel was not at home."

"Not Gabriel, your other son—who—"

"I told you he was hanged."

"But—pardon me—is it not possible he may still live?"

"The devil take you!" cried the woman, flinging off Melicent's hand; "you come here on that scent, do you? There has been a fellow sneaking around here on the same business lately; you are in cahoot with him, I suppose. Let him look out for his life; I'll shoot him like the dog he is if I catch him around my premises again. You can tell him that, my fine madam, if he is a partner of yours."

"He is no partner of mine. I am in no such business. I did not come here with any evil design. I wanted to see you, to get you to speak a word of warning to—to your son. I felt a sympathy, a pity for—"

"I don't want your pity. I know what people's pity means. I know what it's always meant to me and mine. It's like a cat's pity, that pats and licks a rat before she crunches it. That's what people's pity has always been

like to us, especially a woman's. It was a woman's pity, and love, and such stuff, that brought my son to the gallows; and that's what would bring him there again if he was alive."

"Oh, how unjust and cruel you are!" cried Melicent, stung by this allusion, and feeling the tears rush to her eyes. "If you would only trust me, if you would only believe me," she went on, with a sob in her voice.

A hand touched her timidly from behind. Looking around, she saw Harriet.

"Don't cry," whispered the girl; "you mean good, I know. Mimmy, what do you make the girl cry for?"

"Get yourself back into the house, fool!" cried the old woman angrily; "you've made mischief enough with your tongue. You'll be saying some other wild thing for knaves and spies to seize hold of as if it was sense and truth, and go to raking about among dead men's bones on the strength of it."

"She'd never harm his bones—not she—not she," muttered the girl, shaking her head, and looking into Melicent's face in a way that made her tremble lest she had been recognized. But the next moment she added: "She's the mayor's pretty wife. I saw her in a carriage, and she threw sugar-plums and oranges to the children."

"Humph! cheap bribes for dirty votes! Mayor, indeed! There's where that spy's been a-staying. I warrant you, these two are in cahoot. Don't forget my message to him, my lady. They call this the 'Wildcat's Den.' So be it, and let fine birds beware of it, or they'll prove what claws are made for. Good day to you, madam.—Come in here, you hussy, and get back to your work!"

She caught hold of Harriet's sleeve as she spoke, and drew her with her into the house. It was evident she meant to prevent the girl from speaking with Melicent.

Balked of the vague purpose she had had in view, Melicent mounted her horse again and rode sadly away, keeping the path that led by the house and down the hill, running alongside a fence that inclosed a field of corn. At the bottom of the low hill she remembered that there was a bend in the bayou, and a spot where she had often when a child waded for shells, and where she and Neil had many times fished for perch, and made a day's frolic of it by frying their fish under an old ash-tree where there was a thick carpet of fallen leaves, and where bunches of wild fox-grapes dangled overhead. She was sure she would know the place; it was a little to the right of the road she was in. She turned aside from the path, and was riding on through the grass and shrubs, her mind occupied by reminiscences, when her horse came suddenly to a halt, reared slightly, and fell back. At the same instant a small apparition started up before her like a brownie of the woods. It was a boy, barefoot and bareheaded, with a mass of tangled curls on his forehead. He dashed the hair out of his eyes, and shook his clinched fist at her.

"Blast your buttons!" he cried shrilly; "you ride over white folks like they was rabbits, and mashes their hats to bits, and knocks their traps to pieces. Confound it! I'll—I'll—"

His voice died out in a kind of gurgle; the blood gushed over his face; his clinched fist fell; he staggered, and, in spite of his efforts to stand his ground, he dropped down in the grass. Melicent sprang from her horse and

hurried to him, alarmed and remorseful. She lifted his little figure in her arms, carried him to the edge of the bayou, and threw water over his face. At the first dash of the cold fluid he started and partially opened his eyes. The blood still flowed freely, and Melicent, terrified, burst into tears and exclaimed aloud:

“Oh! poor little fellow, he is badly hurt! What shall I do? What in the world shall I do?”

He was already reviving; he opened his eyes and rubbed the water out of them with his knuckles; then he struggled up and got upon his feet.

“Hello! what’s this mean—what’s the matter?” he muttered.

“My poor little boy, you are hurt, and I did it,” Melicent answered.

“Hurt! No, I ain’t; it’s just my nose a-bleeding. It does that any time it takes a notion. Your horse guv me a thump, but, bless you! it warn’t nothing to take on about. Granny gives me harder thumps with her crutch any day. Granny’s got a powerful arm yet, if it is a bit skinny. Why, what on earth was you crying about? Did your horse throw you?”

“Oh! no—I was sorry to see you hurt.”

“Is *that all*?” he exclaimed, staring at her in incredulous surprise. “Would you cry about *that*? Would you be so sorry just for me? Why, granny never does! Nobody minds about me.”

“Are you sure you are not hurt?”

“Oh! I’m all right.”

“And your trap?”

“That can be fixed up again as good as ever. It’s lost its luck at catching partridges, anyhow. Gabe says

it ought to be tied with a silk string to bring back luck."

"Take this, then, and buy you one," said Melicent, pressing two silver dollars into his little dingy palm. He looked at them with sparkling eyes.

"Why, it's silver!" he cried. Then he tendered it back.

"You are giving me this to pay for that knock on my noddle," he cried, "and it's more than it's worth—a great heap more."

"How much is it worth?" asked Melicent, smiling.

"About a nickel, I should say," he answered, with an air of calculation. "It wasn't much of a tap, anyhow—not worth gnat-heels, if you come to the fact."

"And you'll not take the silver?"

"I'd like to have it. Sakes! how 'twould jingle in my pockets!—only the pocket's got a hole in it. Maybe I can trade you out of it, now. I'd take it in fair trade, and glad enough."

"What have you got to trade, my little friend?" Melicent asked, in amused curiosity.

"Just come this way and see, won't you? It's only a few steps off."

He led the way, and she followed him through the grass, until she stopped under that very drooping ash-tree she had been in search of, where she had been wont to sit fishing with Neil. A pen of rough cypress-boards was built under it now, and in the branches of the tree above the pen were hung several wicker cages containing birds. Looking into the pen, Melicent saw a happy family of partridges—the mother hen and a half-grown brood of six or eight, a pompous, glossy-winged *paterfamilias*,

and several pretty pullets besides. A box of straw divided off into little nests was at one end of the pen, and the other was built down into the stream to secure a supply of water.

"Here, you can have any of these that you like," said the boy, climbing up to the top of the pen and pointing out his stock in trade with an air of business. "There's old Mother Brownie and her eight children—nice for a pie; and here's four fat pullets, and Sandy the king of the roost (I shouldn't like Sandy to be put in a pie, though). And here up stairs, you see," he went on, getting upon a plank that was laid across the pen, and sitting down so as to bring his head on a level with the hanging cages—"here up stairs, the gentry are living: this fine couple in red coats," pointing to a nice pair of crested red-birds, "and my young mocking-birds here, and yonder old fellow in a yellow suit, living to himself because his wife died lately and left him a widower. He pretended to be mighty down in the mouth about it, but I see he has come to his appetite and begun to slick up his feathers, to show he wants to marry again."

"Are your mocking-birds good singers?" asked Melicent, much amused.

"Pretty good for beginners, but they are not first rate like one of Ishmael's; it can outsing a—Jews'-harp," he concluded, evidently at a loss for a musical comparison.

"Would he sell them?"

"I don't think he would; they're all his company, and he thinks everything of them—especially of Milly, the pretty hen."

"Milly!" Melicent caught at the name, but she would not betray her sudden interest.

"Who is Ishmael?" she asked carelessly.

"Oh! he's the best—" the boy began with animation; but some sudden afterthought seemed to strike him and quiet him at once. "He is a friend of mine," he said, after a short hesitation, speaking in a lower and changed tone.

"Does he live near here?"

"Not very. Do you like any of these?" he asked, pointing to the birds.

"I will take these scarlet-coated beauties, if you will let me have them. I shall hang the cage in my smoke-tree, since they look so much like two jets of flame."

"I'll bring them to you to-morrow, cage and all. But you've got store-bought cages, I s'pose, twice as nice as this."

"Yes, nicer, but not so rustic-looking. These are woven out of willow, and are very delicately finished and shapely. Did you make them yourself?"

He shook his head.

"A friend made 'em for me," he said, adding hurriedly, as if he did not wish to be questioned concerning the "friend": "I had better go and see about your horse; you didn't fasten him. I'll bring him to you."

He slid down from the pen and bounded off through the grass. Melicent watched his little, active, wiry figure, in a ragged green jacket, with the sun shining on his bare head covered with a tangled mass of brown curls, that looked as though no mother had ever smoothed them.

"What a singular little creature!" she thought; "so shrewd and so independent. The idea of a ragged mite

like him refusing to take money unless in a 'fair trade'! I wonder where he gets his gentlemanly instincts? Is old Hagar his grandmother? And who can 'Ishmael' be? 'Ishmael the son of Hagar,' she mused, thinking of the Bible tradition; "Ishmael the outcast. *He* might take that name very well; it would be appropriate. I must get the boy to tell me more about this Ishmael; but it will not do to ask him as if with a purpose. I can see he is on his guard."

Presently he came back leading the horse, and stood stroking its mane and patting it with a boy's delight in a fine horse. Melicent took the reins in her hand and sat down on a moss-grown log.

"Now that we have struck our trade about the birds, you will not refuse the money any longer," she said, smiling at him as she opened her purse.

But he shook his head (that he had now covered with the fragment of a hat) and shrugged his shoulders—a comical double gesture, expressive of shrewdness as well as negation.

"Not yet," he demurred. "You know the old sayin' about the two bad paymasters—the one that never pays and the one that pays beforehand? How do you know but I would play you a trick—pocket your money, and you never see claw nor feather of the birds? I'll get the money when I bring 'em to you to-morrow; that's business."

"Very well," said Melicent; "it shall be as you say. But are you sure you know where to take them to? Do you know Mr. Avery's house?"

"Certain I do. And so you are the mayor's wife? I knew you before; I saw you the day you come. I was

in the crowd that met you at the depot, when the mayor made his little speech, and you threw sugar-plums and oranges to the boys from the carriage-window."

"Were you there?" Melicent said, laughing. "Did you get any of the sugar-plums?"

"No, I wouldn't scramble. But I got something you had. You dropped a flower and I picked it up; here it is now."

He went up to the gnarled and knotty trunk of the ash, and, inserting his hand into a hollow aperture in the side, drew out a piece of paper carefully folded. He opened it and showed a withered bud of the cape jasmine.

"This hollow tree is my storehouse and my bank," he said. "I keep all my valuables here."

"'Valuables'?" Melicent repeated, smiling at the idea of the word in connection with the ragged little figure before her. "I should like to see them."

He hesitated and looked around at her.

"You'll make fun?" he said, doubtfully.

Melicent threw the reins of her horse over the stump of the fallen tree, and came and sat down by him.

"Not I," she said. "I shall like to see them."

He put his hand into the hollow tree and took out an old oyster-can, containing two big blue marbles, a fishing line, and a harmonica; next he drew out a large brass locket shaped like a watch.

"I found that," he explained. "It's my biggest luck."

Then he took out an old pocket-book, that had three good nickels inside it and one lead one.

"I got that in fair trade," he commented, exhibiting

the counterfeit. "At least, I mean it was fair on my side. I sold a boy a fish for five cents, and he cheated me—give me that no-'count nickel. That was a sneaking trick, wasn't it?"

"It was. What did you do?"

"Why, I told him he was a thief, and we fit about it."

"And you whipped him?"

"No, he licked me; you see he was bigger than me. Here are *my books*."

He pronounced the words "my books" with as much importance as though he were a bibliophile introducing her to his select library. He took out one by one, and carefully brushed and smoothed, a miscellaneous collection of dingy volumes and fragments of volumes. There was part of the history of "Jack the Giant-Killer," with wonderful red and yellow pictures; a dime novel with a sensational woodcut on the back representing a young woman—all streaming hair, bare arms, and exaggerated calves—being carried off by a bewhiskered villain on a flying steed; then a fragment of "Baxter's Saint's Rest" and an old Methodist hymn-book in a leather cover; lastly, a "Webster's Spelling-Book," the worse for handling, and opening of itself at the picture representing the boy being pelted out of the apple-tree.

"Can you read these?" asked Melicent.

"Not yet," he answered, eying them wistfully; "but I'm past 'baker,' and by Christmas Ishmael says—"

He drew in his breath quickly and altered his sentence:

"By Christmas, I think I'll be in 'tribulation.'"

"Not very deep in it, I hope," said Melicent, disposed to smile.

She had noticed how he checked himself at the involuntary mention of Ishmael, and presently she said quietly, as she turned the leaves of the spelling-book:

"Ishmael is the school-teacher, I suppose?"

"No," was the brief answer.

"He is a relation of yours, then?"

"No, he ain't no kin at all."

"Who are your relations? It is the old woman Hagar that you call granny, isn't it? Is she your grandmother?"

"*She* says she ain't, but folks call her so."

"Who is your mother?"

"Folks says Harriet is, but I don' know; *she* ain't never said she was."

"And your father—who is he?"

"Don' know that neither. I'll tell you what, I don't think I ever had any mammy and daddy; I just rained down some day like the frogs. I've seen them rain down—ain't you?"

"I have heard of it. But your name? You have not told me what to call you."

"I'm most as bad off about a name as I am about a daddy and mammy. Granny calls me Cub, and that means a young bear; and t'others calls me Manch, and that means as bad."

"Manch! What *does* it mean?"

"Why, the wise folks that says Harriet's my mother, says my father is a Comanche Injun—a brave that was hung or shot some time or other for taking scalps. They call me Comanche from him—Manch for short, you know. Do I look like an Injun?"

He threw up his head, pushed the tangled hair back

from his forehead, and looked anxiously at Melicent. She, on her part, regarded him attentively. It was a singular little face, thin and sunburned, with large dark eyes. Its expression combined shrewdness with melancholy, defiance with gentleness, while there was a look of sturdy self-reliance about the small, childish mouth, that was pathetic in so little a fellow.

“Indian!” Melicent repeated. “Indian, with such a brow!” and she stroked his forehead with her white fingers. “You look no more like an Indian than I do, my child.”

“But you do resemble Harriet,” was her unuttered thought. “Those eyes, with their sad, patient depths, and their occasional startled, deer-like glance, are like hers and Gabriel’s—and *his*.”

“Really, I must go,” she said, rising, half startled to think how long she had been away. “Good-by, Manch. Don’t forget me; be sure to come to see me to-morrow.”

She sprang hurriedly into her saddle and rode away. She looked back when she was a little way off, and saw the boy still watching her. Her heart yearned strangely over the little lonely-looking, poorly-clad figure standing there under the old ash-tree where she had stood so often when a child, and afterward when she was Neil’s wife, with Neil by her side.

When she reached home, Mr. Avery met her at the gate.

“My love,” he said, “what a long ride you have had alone!”

“Not so long as you think, Aleck; I stopped at a cottage a mile or two down the river to look at a swan. Such a beautiful, stately creature to be imprisoned in a

pig-pen, with a puddle of dirty water to bathe in! It was shocking to one's poetic associations. How pretty it would be to have it for our little park—pasture as you will call it—to swim in Mystic Pond among the lilies! Don't you remember Mrs. Browning's comparison anent Lady Waldemar at the wash-tub?—

‘Conceive, Sir Blaise, those naked, perfect arms—
Round glittering arms—plunged elbow-deep in suds,
Like wild swans hid in lilies all a-shake.’”

“No, I don't remember it at all,” he said, playing with a loosened tress of her hair, as they walked to the house. “But I do remember that it is nearly dinner-time, and that we have company to dine with us to-day. General Foster is already in the drawing-room, and the Bradwells that we invited to meet him will be here directly, no doubt; and here is the mistress of the mansion in a riding-habit, with yards of rebellious hair to be built up in a fashionable tower upon the top of her head.”

“It shall be done as by magic, and I will appear in time to hear the doughty General's before-dinner account of his exploits at the battle of Buena Vista, that I may compare it with his after-dinner version of the same story, as seen in the light of imagination, kindled by his honor the mayor's champagne.”

She waved her hand back to him playfully as she finished speaking, and ran hurriedly up stairs, afraid lest he should remark the excited flutter of her manner, and the flush that burned upon her cheek.

“Already I am descending to duplicity,” she said, throwing herself into a seat when she had reached her

room, and burying her face in her hands, painfully conscious of the concealment she was using toward her husband. "Yet how can I help it? How can I tell him? Would he credit the strange fact of my lost and suddenly recovered recollection? Would he not believe me leagued with my father in basely duping him?" And then came another thought. She knew her husband's strict sense of public duty—his inflexible, perhaps somewhat narrow ideas of what was due to law and justice. Would he not think it right to bring the criminal to punishment? At least he would be far from shielding or protecting him; he would never consent to assist him in escaping. He would hold such an act as contrary to all moral as well as social obligations; as a violation of his duty as a citizen—a duty all the more binding from the fact that he held a responsible position, and was looked up to by the community as one who would protect its interests.

"No, no! I could never tell him," Melicent once more decided, "not even if I was not bound to keep silent by my father's solemn injunction—not even if I did not know that to tell him now would be to forfeit his love and confidence. And then, is there no duty I owe to *that other*—the outcast, the hunted one? God help him! If he is indeed hiding here—if this Ishmael should prove to be he—I will warn him; I will save him at the risk of everything!"

The day's experience had wrought one change in Melicent of which she hardly took cognizance. It had called up many reminiscences connected with Neil Griffin; it had brought his image and his life, as she had known them, distinctly before her mind, *and she no longer had any feeling of his guilt.* She did not reason about it;

she did not analyze her feelings; she simply did not look upon him any longer as a murderer. Still, her fear regarding the way his case would strike Mr. Avery proved that she was conscious her own opinion was not founded upon law or reason, and was not likely to be shared by others, or to stand in a court of justice.

Melicent dressed herself for dinner with the usual care, but she went through the process mechanically, her thoughts being confused, as they always were of late, by the strange phase of destiny through which she was passing. When she had finished her elaborate hair-dressing, she stood awhile before the mirror, that her own reflection might help her to put aside that other bewildering identity—that “second self”—the memory of which was strangely enough becoming more real than her actual life in the present. She stood there in her trailing bronze silk and laces, her ample puffs, and braids, and jewels, remembering that she was the wife of Alexander Avery, wealthy real-estate owner and mayor of Alluvia; remembering, too, that he loved her and trusted her, and that she carried a secret in her heart that already seemed dividing her life from his, alienating her sympathies, making her restless in his presence and eager to fly to solitude, or to the relief of a crowd.

A trial awaited her down stairs. She had to reply to the Hon. Mrs. Bradwell's lady-like platitudes, and to endure her daughter's pretty silliness; she had to encounter General Foster's stereotyped compliments, and to smile at the Hon. Bradwell's original jokes about married life, and the tyranny of pretty wives. She had the additional discomfiture of meeting the keen black eyes of Colonel Archer fixed upon her with a look she did not like—a

look that seemed to her to have amused malice mixed with its expression of bold admiration—a look that certainly conveyed the idea of fellowship, of collusion, founded upon their late conversation. When the Bradwells had taken their leave, and the mayor had carried off his friend the General to the stables to see a fresh acquisition in horse-flesh, Archer came and sat down by Mrs. Avery, and looked into her face with that half-malicious, half-admiring gaze.

“Your ride gave you a fitful color,” he said; “it comes and goes in a breath. What did you hear at the ‘Wildcat’s Den’? Did the old cat show her claws?”

“The old cat!” faltered Melicent. “Did you know?—where were you?”

“Not so far off that I could not see you very well with the aid of a field-glass. Did I not tell you there was a sharp lookout kept on that house all the time? But what did you do to make the old hag so angry? How she scolded, and how scared you were! I saw her swooping over you like a hawk over a pigeon. Did you make any mention of that gallows-bird, her son?”

“I asked if she did not have another son besides the one she named.”

“And she took it as an insult—perhaps thought you were a spy. See here: let me tell you, you must beware how you speak to her or to any member of her family in a way to excite their suspicions. I am afraid they suspect already, and an injudicious question from you might put them on their guard, and make you a marplot instead of an ally.”

“An ally!” Melicent said haughtily. “You are

mistaken ; I never proposed myself as your ally in the matter ! ”

“ Counselor, confidante, coadjutor, then, if you please. Was I not to keep you advised of the progress I made in finding out the criminal ? ”

“ Yes,” answered Melicent, every other feeling overruled by her anxiety to keep acquainted with the steps Archer was taking in detecting Neil. “ Have you discovered anything more ? ” she asked, with an eagerness of manner that did not escape Colonel Archer.

“ Nothing definite. I thought, a day or two ago, that we had flushed our game, but I am afraid it will prove that we are after the wrong bird. ”

“ What is he like ? Whom do your suspicions point to ? ”

“ Well, they have lit upon a kind of night-bird ; comes out only after dark, when owls and bats do—a suspicious character, with dyed hair and whiskers, and green spectacles on what seems an exaggerated nose. He lives in a back room on a dirty street, and has no perceptible business beyond occasional peddling of thin-skinned jewelry. ”

“ Ah ! ” uttered Melicent, drawing a deep breath of relief.

“ But we have nothing to go upon besides the facts that his appearance is suspicious, and that he has been seen conversing with Gabriel Griffin. I fear it will prove a wrong scent. If it does, I will try a plan of my own I have been studying over ; I think it a good one, and likely to succeed. ”

“ What is it ? ” asked Melicent quickly.

“ Ah ! that’s telling. Who was it denied being my

ally so disdainfully a moment ago? You can not deny an interest in the case. To tell the truth, the great interest you take in it puzzles me no little. There must be something at the bottom of it; I wonder what it is?"

"What is there to wonder at? The common fascination of anything tragical—an idle woman's penchant for a bit of romance—is that wonderful at all?"

"Yes, in *you*, whose life is filled up with other interests—novel and satisfying, one would think. Newly made bride, mistress of a pretty house, and queen of a little circle, why should *you* concern yourself in the ferreting out of a murder committed by a man you never knew, when you were in pinafores? Why should it agitate you when first spoken of, and attract and absorb you afterward? Confess that it is puzzling. And why," he continued, his eyes seeming to burn her, so near they were, and so bright and keen—"why, when I speak of this puzzle, do you tremble and turn pale, as you do now?"

She felt that she had indeed changed color under that searching look; she must ward off its scrutiny at all hazards.

"Will you give no weight to friendship?" she asked. "May not the matter interest me because it concerns *you*?"

His dark face lighted as by a flash; he leaned nearer—his hand fell upon hers.

"If I could believe that," he said, in a half whisper, so earnest that Melicent felt the blood rush to her temples. She had caught at random at any suggestion that would help her parry his penetration; she repented having done so the instant afterward. Mortified and indig-

nant, she hurriedly withdrew her hand from his. As she did so, her husband entered the room.

"Melicent," he began.

She looked up startled; the flush receded from her face, and left it pale. Seeing her confusion and Archer's attitude, Mr. Avery stopped short and looked at them in grave surprise. Melicent rose hastily.

"You wanted me," she said, going up to him and laying her hand on his arm. He did not take the hand, nor did he reply for a moment. Then he said:

"I was going to ask you to help me with some writing. My letters have accumulated lately, and I have notes to make for a speech. But it does not matter. You are engaged."

"No," she responded quickly; "I shall be glad to help you. Colonel Archer will excuse me."

The Colonel bowed, showing his white teeth through his black mustache in a smile that had a tinge of the satirical about it.

The library joined the drawing-room, and was a bright, cheerful little room, eminently suggestive of quiet and domestic comfort. The round-table was pushed forward, and had papers and lighted candles upon it. The room had pleasant associations for Melicent. Here she and her husband often read and wrote together, but now she missed his usual manner. He was never demonstrative, but when they were alone he had quiet little caressing ways expressive of tenderness. These Melicent now missed, as they stood side by side at the table. She sat down and began looking over the pile of letters, on the backs of which he wrote rapidly in pencil the substance of the answers required. The door of the library, open-

ing into the drawing-room, had not been fully closed, and they could hear Colonel Archer walking restlessly up and down with his light, but firm, soldierly tread. At length he paused beside the piano, and began to touch the keys and hum an air Melicent did not know. Presently he sang it, striking a few chords by way of accompaniment. He sang in a low tone, but his rich, deep bass made the words audible :

“Never put love in a cage, my dearie,
Or his eye will dim and his wing grow weary.
Give him his will and he will not range ;
He will make him a nest and never seek change.
Bright and hard is the marriage-ring ;
A kiss, I ween, is a sweeter thing.
Fly from your cage, O bird I love best !
And find in my arms a warmer rest.”

“An execrable sentiment !” muttered Mr. Avery, throwing down his pencil in disgust. He glanced across at Melicent, and she was conscious that there was grave questioning in his eye. She would have given much to be able to meet it with an open, fearless, unconcealed look, but she felt that she could not. The secret that had been forced into her life burdened her like guilt, and now it was becoming complicated by other concealments growing out of it. What if these concealments should produce suspicion on the part of her husband, and end in alienating his affections from her for ever ! How could she bear this ? He was a man whose love would seem like a crown to a woman—his tenderness was so exclusively given to the one beloved. To others his bearing was courteous and affable, but always with a touch of pride and reserve about it that kept even his friends at a distance. Only

to her he unbent ; the keen, blue eyes softened, and the firm mouth relaxed into tenderness. There was one expression, one smile of peculiar sweetness, that was reserved for his moments of confidence and affection. Melicent believed that she only of all the world knew the transfiguring power of that rare smile.

Open, upright, and loyal-hearted was Alexander Avery, but proud and sensitive ; slow to suspect, but quick to resent a wrong when he knew it to be such. Perhaps he was somewhat narrow in his views of character and conduct. Straightforward himself, he could not tolerate wavering or inconsistency in others. Melicent felt that he could not sympathize with her present state of mind, perplexed as it was by opposing feelings and conflicting ideas of duty.

CHAPTER V.

MR. AVERY went away next morning directly after breakfast. He kissed Melicent as usual when she went with him to the hall-door, but she felt that there was a shadow of indifference both in the kiss and the look that accompanied it. He glanced a little impatiently at Colonel Archer, who had flung himself on a sofa and was idly snuffing the fragrance of a damask rose he had brought from his morning stroll in the garden.

“ Shall you attend the meeting at Liberty Hall to-day, Colonel ? ” he asked. “ In honor of General Foster, you know.”

“ That depends,” answered Archer languidly. “ I

don't feel attracted by politics just now. I may drop in later in the day, when you have all warmed to your work, and there is a fine current of magnetism stirring. I don't care to hear the pop-gun batteries that I suppose will open the day."

When Melicent returned from the door he was still sitting in his half-recumbent position, tapping his mustached lips with the velvet-petaled rose. A smile lurked in his eyes when he raised them to Melicent.

"That good-by kiss," he said. "It is a part of the day's programme, is it—a stereotyped matter-of-course fact, like the morning muffin and coffee? I don't like matter-of-course things. They are humdrum and flavorless. The daily rose is a commonplace affair; a flower like this comes as a surprise. By the way, I had a rose-colored dream last night; should you like to hear it?"

"No," said Melicent coldly; "I never care for dreams—the merest shadows of phantasy."

"'Thought by day makes dream by night,' you know. Well, since you will not listen to fancy, can I entertain you with reason? Will you hear the detective plan I mentioned to you yesterday? I matured it last night over a pipe full of the weed celestial."

Melicent hesitated.

"Yes," she said doubtfully.

She was anxious to hear the plot that Neil Griffin's fate might hang upon, but she was most unwilling to have any further confidences with Colonel Archer.

"You hesitate," he said, his eagle glance searching her face and detecting her reluctance. "You would like to hear what I have to say, but you don't want to hear it

from *me*. Very well, let it pass with the dream. I shall not trouble your ladyship with my conversation."

"Now he is displeased," Melicent thought, "and I must not make him angry, or I shall never find out anything further from him."

She moved a step nearer to his side, and said in the softest tones of her voice, that was most musical and thrilling:

"Pardon me. I am not well to-day. I scarcely slept at all last night, and I feel hardly equal to conversation. I think I will keep my room, and try solitude and quiet."

He looked long at her lovely pale face and drooping lashes.

"Pardon you!" he said, more earnestly than was required. "Assuredly. One could pardon everything in you but indifference. You are too pale; that is true. Your lonely rides disagree with you. Companionship would be more cheering. I doubt the efficacy of your prescription of solitary quiet. At least, take my rose with you, and let it whisper sweet things to your solitude."

He laid it in her hand. Her first impulse was to refuse it as coldly as she might, but her desire to retain this man's good will caused her to set aside the impulse, and to close her fingers silently upon the flower. He saw the struggle in her mind, and smiled in his covert way as she turned off with a red flush staining her cheek that had been like a lily before.

"She is afraid of me," he said to himself, apparently well pleased. "I remember in Montana it was the *shyest* game that I loved best to hunt."

The man was lawless by habit, perhaps by nature. He had lived so long in rude lands, outside the pale of civilization, that he had no regard for rules of society or codes of morality. Had Melicent been a maiden to be wooed and won, it is doubtful if he would have thought of her. He saw her a beautiful woman, hedged around by the barrier of marriage and mutual love, and he coveted the flower that was beyond his reach. Still, had it not been for that interview (of her own seeking) on the night of the revelation of the "Gallows Tree"—had it not been for the secret understanding then established between them, which had grown out of her relation to Neil, his vague admiration would never have ripened to passion, and never dared to express itself so boldly. Melicent felt this, and the consciousness of it added the bitterness of humiliation to her perplexity and distress.

"I must end it," she cried, when alone in her room. "At all hazards, I must put a stop to it," she repeated, her cheeks burning with mortified pride and wounded delicacy.

She did not know the stringency of circumstances, nor the difficulty of drawing back when once the feet have been set upon unsafe ground.

"Flora," Melicent said, rising as her maid entered the room, "I do not want to see any company to-day. Remember, I am not at home to any one that calls."

"Why, Miss Melicent! what for did you dress yourself so beautiful then in that shally dress that makes you look like a blue mornin'-glory? And you know the Bradwell ladies are comin' here to-day to see your new bonnet and dresses."

"You can take them down for their inspection, then ;

I do not wish to see them or any one else to-day. Yes, stay ; if a little boy comes with a cage of birds, show him up to my room."

Left alone, she tried to interest herself in writing to her father, but her feelings, that had once flowed out to him with such loving freedom, were now constrained and embittered. There was gloom in every direction her thoughts could turn ; and, looking forward, she seemed to see the shadow deepening into darkness, and all the beauty of her life eclipsed.

She was roused from her melancholy musings by Flora rapping at the door and announcing that "here was the boy with the cage of birds."

"Very well, let him come in ; I want to see him a few moments. You need not wait," said Melicent, rising as Manch entered and deposited his cage on the floor. He had taken off his hat with the intention of putting it there also, but looking down at the carpet with its creamy ground and wreaths of bluebells and golden-green ferns, he snatched up the battered head-covering suddenly, with a sense of its unfitness to touch anything so dainty. He had a feeling of his own incongruity to his surroundings, which deepened as he saw Melicent coming to meet him—beautiful in her blue morning robe and shining hair, with the glow of genuine welcome in her lovely eyes ; for this little nameless child was the one person on earth whose coming to-day could give her unmixed pleasure. He colored with admiration and bashfulness, and hesitated to take her offered hand.

"So you are as good as your word, Manch," she said ; "I am glad to see you. What ! won't you shake hands with me ?"

His brown little fist came out of his pocket.

"It's not fit to touch your hand," he said, as she took it in hers. "It looks like a bumble-bee in a lily."

"What a quaint comparison!" Melicent said, laughing. "But you are a queer boy any way, Manch. So, you have brought the red-jackets. See how bewildered they look! They don't think this is half so nice as the green ash-tree and the blue sky; and neither do I."

"Don't you, now?" queried the boy, moving nearer to her and looking up with more confidence; "don't you? That's curious."

"Why should it be? Do you like it as well?"

"Oh! it's nat'ral I shouldn't. I'm a 'Cub,' you know—born and bred in the woods, as the rabbit said. If I lived here, I'd feel like the wolf in the story, when the dog wanted him to have full rations and a warm kennel, but he'd have to wear the collar and chain. I'd rather have hard fare and the freedom of the woods. But it's different with a grand lady like you. It suits you; you was born to it."

"You think I was to the 'manor born,' Manch?" Melicent said, smiling sadly. "Perhaps you are mistaken; perhaps rough log walls and green woods are old acquaintances of mine. But come, you have fulfilled all the conditions of fair trade. You can't refuse your pay any longer. Here it is—the silver dollars and some small money to help the jingle. But how about the pocket? Is the hole in it mended?"

He looked down.

"Harriet forgot to sew it, and I fastened it up myself—sorter," he said, blushing, but with a comical twinkle in his eye.

“Let me see it.”

He turned the pocket inside out, and exhibited the hole lapped over and fastened with a pin.

“A very unsafe receptacle,” was Melicent’s comment; “not to be trusted when silver is the deposit. Here, take off the jacket and sit down, while I mend the pocket, or put in another one; this is hardly worth mending.”

He shook his head.

“It’s not so clean,” he said, in a low tone, “and it’s rough; you’ll spoil your pretty hands and your dress.”

“Oh! I’m not afraid of my hands; and to please you, I’ll tie on this apron over my dress. I’ll show you something to amuse you when you have given me the jacket.”

He took it off without further demur, and watched her curiously while she opened her pearl-inlaid work-box, and fitted a tiny gold thimble on her finger. Then she took a small stereoscope and a handful of engravings from the table near her, and gave them to him.

“I see you like pictures, by the way you look at those on the wall; here are some striking views and some pretty groups.”

She showed him how to adjust the stereoscope, and then went to work on the pocket. From time to time she looked up and noticed that he took more than a child’s ordinary interest in the pictures. His face showed intelligent appreciation. Especially was he pleased with two pictures: one representing the charge of a wounded buffalo upon a couple of mounted hunters on the prairie; the other, a battle between the Cheyenne and Pawnee Indians—a stormy sky lowering over a savage display of wild horses and wilder men, the Indians sending their

hurtling arrows at each other as they dashed around in circles, dodging down and clinging to the bodies of their galloping mustangs, which were thus interposed as flying barricades for their riders.

"You understand about that," said Melicent, observing his eyes sparkle as he examined it.

"Oh, yes! I've heard about it. Ishmael's told me all about Indians and buffalo many a rainy night. He's seen lots of wild places and things all over the world, for all he lives now in that lonesome little den on the bayou. Don't you think that's a cowardly way to fight—to dodge over on the safe side of your horse and let the arrows play the devil with the poor critter, while you keep out of harm's way?"

"Yes, it's rather cruel and cowardly. Tell me, why does he live by himself in the little den on Black Bayou?"

"Who?"

"Ishmael."

"Who said he lived there?"

"You did—a moment ago."

"Did I say that?"

A look of distress and self-reproach overspread the boy's face; the stereoscope dropped on his knee, his pleasure in it suddenly spoiled. His eagerness about the picture, it seemed, had caused him unwittingly to betray a secret. Melicent felt sure of this. He sat looking down on the hearth-rug in silence, and a tear wet his long lashes; he dashed his hand angrily across his eyes.

"Dog-gone it! I'm a long-tongued fool!" he exclaimed. "It's just like granny said: what they want is to find out—that's all. I'll never trust anybody again!"

"What was it your granny said?" asked Melicent.

He did not reply, but sat in moody reflection.

"I think I know what she said," Melicent went on; "she told you I was a spy—trying to find out some one with a bad design."

He raised his eyes and looked at her earnestly—a searching, penetrating look that seemed to probe her very soul—a strange look for a child. He laid the tips of his small fingers upon her arm.

"Would you hunt out a man that way?" he asked, in an eager whisper—"a man what had had trouble and sickness, and was living off to himself and not doing no wrong even to a dog? Would you help to hunt him out and bring him to harm—hang him, say?"

"Not for the world—oh! not to save my own life!" cried Melicent, in low, heart-felt accents.

His eyes brightened, but he did not speak.

"If you mean Ishmael," Melicent went on, "let me tell you, Manch, I wish very, very much to know all about him, from a motive of my own—not to do him harm, but to do him good. Will you not tell me all you know of him?"

"No; I've told too much already. I wish my tongue had been clipped before I said what I did!"

"You will not trust me with your secret, then. Well, I will trust you with mine; I will tell you what I have never told anybody before. Listen to me attentively. I have a friend who loved a man very much. He disappeared, and she thought him dead. Long afterward she found out he was still living, but was in great danger of losing his life. There was an enemy on the lookout for him. She (this friend of mine, you understand) wanted to find out where he was, that she might put him on his

guard—might warn him who was in search of him, and what plans were laid for his discovery. She wanted to find him out, that she might help him all she could—help him with means to get away if he wanted it, and with information where he might find a person in a far city who, for her sake, would befriend him with influence and money.”

The boy listened to her intently—his earnest eye fixed upon hers.

“You said this friend loved him once, a long time ago; does she love him now?” he asked.

The question confused Melicent; her cheeks burned as she answered low:

“She must care for him, or she would not take this interest in his welfare.”

“And you think—that Ishmael may be the man?”

“I can not tell; Ishmael was not his name.”

“How did he look? Did you know him?”

“I have seen him—years ago; no doubt he is greatly changed since then. But there was one peculiarity about him which may still be the same. He had singular eyes; that is, the expression—the look in them, you know—was singular. They were large, with long, curling lashes; and at times they had a wild, startled look, like a deer’s or some wild creature’s that you have just caught. That was the look that came into them at times; at others they were soft and gentle, with a sort of sorrowful look like some animal’s—a dog, for instance—that has been badly treated and can never forget it, but does not bear any malice on that account.”

The child hung upon her words with the same anxious intentness as before, following the very motion of

her lips as she described the eyes of Neil Griffin. She saw by the expression of his face that he recognized the peculiarity she portrayed. He looked down, as if instinctively fearful she would read his thoughts in his eyes. She waited a moment for him to speak, but he did not raise his head. She said at length:

"I have told you my secret, Manch—a secret I have never spoken of to any other person—not even to my husband. I trust it to you. Remember, do not betray me."

"No, I won't—unless," he added, with a bitterness of self-reproach, "unless I play the fool and blab it out unknownst, as I did poor Ishmael's."

"But you have not told anything about Ishmael—at least, anything of importance. I have trusted you with my secret, but you will not show equal confidence in me."

"This ain't *my* secret; if it was, I shouldn't mind telling you; but you see—"

His voice dropped abruptly, and he remained looking down in silence. Melicent finished putting in the new pocket, and sat with the jacket in her lap, and her hands clasped tightly upon it. He looked up, and regarded her with a grave fixedness that made his small face look old. At last he said, slowly:

"When your horse struck me on the head, when I was baiting my trap yesterday, and knocked the breath out of me a bit, *you cried about it*; I saw you."

"Well, there was nothing strange in that."

"Yes, there was; it was strange you should care enough to cry about *me*. If you cared about my getting that little hurt, I don't think you would want to harm *him*."

“No, indeed, I would not. Child, as God hears me, I mean him only good. You can trust me.”

“I will trust you—I am going to tell you all I know about Ishmael; but if granny knew it my skin wouldn’t be worth tanning,” he added, with one of his curious transitions from gravity to ludicrousness.

“It was early this summer, about hoeing-time, that I saw Ishmael for the first. He came to granny’s house one night. She was sitting nodding over the fire that had a’most gone out. There wasn’t anybody in the room but her and me. I was lying on my pallet in the corner, but I wasn’t sleep; I was sick, and the fever made me wakeful. I saw Ishmael when he first came in, before granny turned round. He looked mighty pale and weak, and he was lame a little; you know he’d had the rheumatiz fever. When granny saw him, she jumped up and give a howl. ‘God save us! Is it you or your ghost?’ she said, and she called him a name that—well, it wasn’t Ishmael.”

“Was it Neil?” asked Melicent, speaking low.

He nodded.

“That was it; I never heard the name called before nor since, till now. Ishmael put out his hands and cried:

“‘Not that name—that name is dead. I am Ishmael, the wanderer.’

“‘Son of Hagar, the despised,’ granny said. ‘You chose your new name well, my boy.’

“He sat down by the fire to dry himself, for the night was misty and chillish. Chowder came and laid his head against his knee and whined. He patted the dog’s head, and I see the water come in his eyes and

stand on his cheek. Granny looked at him as if she was sorry, but by and by she said to him, scornful-like :

“ ‘ I see who you are thinking of. Ain’t you done grieving about *her* yet? It’s high time, considerin’ she’s been your ruin—brought you to a rope’s end once, and likely’ll be the cause of your being brought there ag’in, and to your grave this time; for I’ll tell you, they’ve started up a fresh hunt after you lately, from some signs I’ve seen. They found out you was only half hung that time, and they’re kinder anxious to finish the job.’

“ He looked up tired-like and said :

“ ‘ Let them do it, then. I’m not going away. I’m tired of wandering and dodging about. I haven’t much life left, and I’m come back here to die and be buried—by *her*.’

“ He staid there in granny’s house for some weeks, and kept out of sight of everybody. I took to him mightily, and he took to me. You see we was both two critters that nobody cared about, and that found the world kind o’ lonesome. I had fever-cake them days, and couldn’t do much but set about; and he tried to show me how to make fish-nets and baskets, and how to stuff birds; and he learned me my letters. But granny kept him worried. Every now and then she *would* have a fling at some folks he cared a heap about. They were dead, too, I believe; but anyhow, he cared for them all the same, and it hurt him to hear her talk rough about them. She was after him, too, to tell something; he wouldn’t tell, nohow. From what I could make out, it was to tell who it was he saw kill some man or other. He always fell into one of his silent sort o’ ways when

she talked about that, and never opened his lips to answer her.

“ Well, after a while, we found out they was hunting round the house to catch him ; and Gabe and granny was afeared he would be found, and begged him to go away. He didn’t seem to want to go at first ; but one darkish night he got worried and wild-like, and he just went off without sayin’ a word to anybody. And I follows him. We goes up Black Bayou for a mile or so, and it begins to rain, and I gets him to take shelter in a little old cabin in the swamp, the other side of the bayou. An old, *old* nigger—a hundred years old, I reckon—used to live there once, and got his living by selling fish ; but one day they found him dead, sitting against a tree on the bank of the bayou with his fishing-rod in his hand ; and since then nobody has lived there, until me and Ishmael pulled up there that rainy night. The old cabin was hid away in a clump of trees, and we had to lift up the long moss to get at it. I tell you it looked scary, and I thought of the old nigger and of all the ghost tales I ever heard Harriet tell. But we kindled a fire, and I roasted a couple of taters I had in my pocket, and spread out Ishmael’s blanket he had brought round him, and we laid down and slept till morning. Then Ishmael said he should stay there, for he had no money and no heart to go any farther ; and so he lives there by himself, and catches fish and makes baskets, and I sells ’em for him. I go to see him pretty often, but I don’t go straight from our house, for fear of putting the spies on his track ; I takes my rod and line and fishes along up the bayou, or I goes rabbit-hunting with Chowder, and takes a roundabout course before I get to Ishmael’s hut. Nobody don’t suspect a little chap like

me, always runnin' here and there like a squirrel and goin' on errands for anybody that offers me a nickel. And I don't think they're suspicious of Ishmael, neither. Nobody knows about him hardly, and the few that do think he's some poor crippled fellow that's taken the old nigger's place in the fish-business. Do you think they'll be apt to find him out and go for him?"

"I trust not—I can not tell," Melicent said, with a huskiness in her voice.

She had listened with a swelling heart to the boy's simple recital. The emotions of pity and sympathy it stirred were mixed with self-reproach and a kind of remorseful tenderness. It seemed as if she were in some way responsible for the fate of this man, with whose life her own had once been so closely associated. Her heart ached yearningly over the picture that Manch had drawn of him—desolate, friendless, broken in health, with no comforts about him, and nothing consoling in his life save the attachment of one small being as friendless as himself.

"Well, if they go for him," said Manch, "I'll do the best I can to back him. I've cleaned out old Rusty Crusty (that's my pistol, you know), and I'll go one shot on 'em, for I know they've no right to bother Ishmael; he never done harm to a living soul—he won't so much as hurt a dog."

Melicent reflected anxiously a moment; at length she said:

"I think it would be better for him to go away; some slight accident might give his enemies a clew to him. They are beginning to be very much in earnest about finding him. Manch, you must get him to go away."

Manch shook his head.

"I'll try, but I'm afeard he won't go. He won't believe he is in any danger; and, if he does believe it, he won't care enough to try and save himself. He says he is tired tramping and dodging about; he wants to die and be buried here. No, he won't mind me; he'll just put me off and say: 'If it comes, let it come, Manch; life's not so sweet, anyhow, when you get to the dregs. Let's go and hear if Constant's pipe is in tune to-day.' That's his mocking-bird, you know."

"But he might listen to his mother—your grandmother, I mean—or to Gabriel."

"Granny don't go to see him or have anything to do with him; she's afeard it will make people suspect him. And Gabe's the same, only worse; for Gabe's scary on his own account. Harriet would do her best, for her heart's all right if her head ain't, and she'd go through fire for anybody she cared about, for all she's skittish as a rabbit; but granny won't trust her out of her sight. It seems that one of the men that's spying around for Ishmael got hold of her, and flattered and dazed her so she told something she'd no business to. Granny got to questioning her pretty sharp, and she made a clean breast of it; and now granny keeps a close watch upon her."

Melicent, absorbed and troubled, said again:

"I know he ought to go away. He should be prevailed upon to go."

The boy looked at her from under his curled eyelashes, and seemed to weigh some question in his mind.

"If *you* could talk to him, now—" he began, and then stopped and looked again at Melicent.

Melicent's heart gave a throb. This suggestion had

lurked in some corner of her mind all the time as a vague, unformed wish. She repelled it, however, but not decisively.

“That would not do,” she said doubtfully.

“Are you afraid it would set ’em on his track? Do they mistrust about you—I mean about your friend’s knowing Ishmael and wanting to help him?”

“No; I told you it was a secret nobody knows but ourselves, and it must not be told, not even to Ishmael. I don’t think my seeing Ishmael would look suspicious, even if it were found out.”

“Oh! bless you, we could manage it. You go to ride, and take it roundabout like I do. It’s only a mile or so up the bayou from where you saw me yesterday. You could easy find it by following the bayou. There’s a path runs along it on the other side, and this season you can cross it anywhere. You might stop and pretend to Ishmael as if you wanted to see his birds, or to buy a basket, or to bargain for a trout for dinner.”

“You are fertile in suggestions, Manch,” Melicent said, with a short, nervous laugh, and red spots coming and going on her cheeks. The thought of seeing and helping this poor recluse, whom she now knew to be Neil, set her pulses beating at a fever-rate. She heard steps coming up the stairs. Manch had got up to go, and was replacing the stereoscope and pictures.

“Keep them,” she said. “Take them to Ishmael; they may amuse him. And, Manch,” she whispered, bending down hurriedly, with her arm around him, and laying her cheek to his, “look for me to-morrow morning.”

“All right,” he returned, his face blushing and lighted.

"I'll manage to make you find us. Just ride on up the bayou, and you'll hear something besides the swamp frogs."

CHAPTER VI.

"ARE you going to ride this morning?" asked Melicent of her husband as he came into the room, with his riding-boots on and his spur in his hand.

"Only as far as the mill," he answered, but without warmth in his tones, and without offering to approach where she stood at an open window.

"May I go with you?"

"Certainly, if you wish; but I must tell you that I shall be detained at the mill some time, inspecting the working of some new machinery I have just had put up. You will find it tiresome waiting."

"If I do, I'll cut the company of you and your machinery and come home alone," Melicent said playfully, longing to see the cloud pass from her husband's eyes.

At the same time she could not help thinking how this arrangement favored her secret resolve to visit Ishmael at his cabin. If her movements were really observed with suspicion by Colonel Archer, her riding this morning *up* the river, instead of down, and furthermore accompanied by her husband, would put his suspicions at fault—dispel them, perhaps, before they could take definite shape. On returning, she trusted to be able to get out of town by a back way unperceived, and to find Black Bayou and the fisherman's hut described by Manch. She retired to change her dress, with feelings divided between

distress at her husband's unaccustomed coldness and excitement at the thought of the interview that awaited her.

"I must dress as unlike the Milly he used to know as possible," she thought, winding her hair into coils about her stately head.

She was on the point of putting on a blue habit, when a sudden recollection induced her to lay it aside. A blue muslin was her best dress in that one bright summer that she had been Neil's wife. Blue might possess associations for him—might furnish a link that would extend into a swift chain of recollection, and lead to her being recognized. She put up the blue habit, and substituted one of black velvet, fastened to the throat by buttons of dull gold. She wore with this a black hat with drooping plumes, and as an aigrette a golden hand clasping a coral spray.

"Why do you look at me so, Aleck?" she asked, smiling, but rather uneasily, as she stood on the steps drawing on her riding-gloves. Her husband had come up, and stood waiting on the walk below, regarding her with a questioning, half-cynical look.

"I was wondering at the dancing brightness there is in your eyes—like an *ignis fatuus*. It is unusual. What has kindled it there?"

"Fever, perhaps," she answered, dropping her lids; "I have not been able to sleep refreshingly for several nights, and I have a dull, throbbing pain in my temples."

His face softened; he looked at her attentively.

"And you did not speak of it to me?" he said with concern in his voice and repressed tenderness in his look.

"Perhaps you had better not ride. It may fatigue you."

"No; it will do me good. I feel as if I needed rapid

motion," she returned, as she seated herself in the saddle and took the reins from his hand.

Their ride carried them through the upper part of the town—through a suburb irregularly built, and composed for the most part of "shanties" and hastily constructed houses in the "American railroad" style of architecture. On the back porch of one of these buildings stood two persons whose appearance riveted Melicent's attention. They were a man and woman. The man caught Melicent's eye from the fact that, though he stood with his back toward her, leaning against a post, his dress, his attitude of insolent ease, and his tall figure, reminded her of Colonel Archer. The woman was young and handsome—a dark, bold-eyed beauty, round-throated and full-lipped, with a quantity of shining black hair tucked carelessly under a black-and-red net, and a slender figure, graceful even in the soiled pink wrapper which she wore, bound round the waist with a cord, the tassel of which she twisted absently as she listened to what her companion was saying. Her face, lifted to his, had an expression of earnest, business-like attention, while yet a smile of malicious mischief lurked about her mouth.

Melicent's quick eye had just photographed this expression, when the girl tossed her little head—a toss that sent a portion of her rich hair tumbling out of the net—and exclaimed:

"Two days! Why, I can do it in two hours, if it can be done at all. Hearts are not heads, and quick work is the motto in affairs of this kind."

"The quicker the better," was the reply of the man. "But mind you—"

He stopped, checked by a low exclamation from the

girl, and turned his head quickly toward the street. He averted it even more hastily, but not before Melicent had assured herself that it was really Colonel Archer. Evidently he did not wish to be recognized, and Melicent gave no sign of having done so. Mr. Avery had noticed nothing particular in the scene on the back porch. He had given it a casual glance, and then turned his head to bow to an acquaintance on the opposite side of the street.

"Who lives there—do you know?" Melicent asked of him when they had gone a few steps farther.

"No; they are new-comers, I think—French people, I should say, or of French extraction. You see the pair of poodles on the steps and that hideous parrot in the window?"

"And that old woman in the short gown and man's hat, who is scrubbing dirty linen in the back yard, is singing a French ditty," added Melicent, thinking at the same time that the girl had also spoken with a French accent, and wondering much what her words meant, and what Colonel Archer could be doing there engaged in such earnest conversation with her.

On arriving at the mill, Mr. Avery said, as he assisted Melicent to dismount:

"You can sit in the office and rest while I look at the machinery."

"I had rather go with you, if you will let me," she answered. "I am not tired in the least."

Throwing her long riding-skirt over her arm, she went into the mill. It was not the first time she had been there. She had a feeling of sympathy—of fellowship, perhaps—with all working people, and liked to be where they were busy at their labors; liked to speak

friendly words to them, and show the interest she felt in their pursuits and their welfare. She greeted them pleasantly now as she passed—the carters in the yard, the errand-boys, and the workmen in the mill, in their white blouses, with their bare, muscular arms, their hair and faces all powdered with flour. They turned to look after her with hearty admiration, and such a brightening of the eyes as happens when a brilliant sun-burst takes the place of cloudy and dismal weather.

They went down to the engine-room, and there Mr. Avery entered into a discussion with the grimy-faced individual who presided, concerning the new principle of action on which the engines were working, and learned from him that there was something wrong—"a hitch somewhere that made a drawback every now and then, though he couldn't be sure where the fault lay."

Mr. Avery went to work examining and questioning with zest, and Melicent, left to herself, walked about aimlessly, and thought of the cabin on Black Bayou, and was sure that Manch was waiting for her and remembering the promise implied in her parting words of "Look for me to-morrow." She walked about absently, and did not notice that several times she approached nearer than she should to a large wheel that was rapidly revolving with a great buzz and whir, and turning, by means of its straps and bands, other smaller wheels in the department above. Suddenly she felt a violent jerk from behind, and at the same instant saw herself in what seemed a fatal proximity to the wheel. She turned faint and dizzy, and would have staggered and been caught by those whirling arms into an embrace of death, had not other arms interposed to rescue her from the frightful

peril. Quick as thought her husband sprang forward and snatched her from the danger. Supporting her in his arms, he bent over her with a face as white as her own.

"Melicent, my love—my darling!" he uttered, his coldness and distrust vanishing in the rush of anxious tenderness.

She opened her eyes and smiled reassuringly.

"I am not hurt, Aleck—only frightened," she asserted, standing upon her feet, but still clinging to him as much in tenderness as in weakness. "I am not hurt—thanks to you, Aleck," she repeated, unwinding his arm from around her and putting his hand to her lips, with a look into his eyes of tender, almost humble gratitude; for the thought that she was wronging his love by her concealment was supreme in her mind at this moment of her preservation.

She had no time to say more, for at this instant the engineer rushed in with a glass of water, and the burly head clerk came panting up with a black bottle labeled "Spirits," followed by several of his younger assistants, one of them having snatched up in his hurry a jar of perfumed hair-oil belonging to the dandy of the establishment. Melicent was able to smile as she thanked them (though with rather a pale face), assuring them that she was quite recovered. She shuddered, however, when the engineer put into her hand some torn scarlet strips, saying that it was the remains of her scarf, which had caught in the wheel and been jerked from her shoulders.

Mr. Avery himself was paler and more agitated than Melicent.

"We will go home at once," he said, and drawing

her arm through his he took her out of the mill. As they were preparing to mount their horses, the engineer came up and said :

“ See here, Mr. Avery, how about that new machinery ? I don’t like to try it as it is without your being here to watch how it works.”

“ I’ll come to-morrow, Watson ; I have an engagement for the afternoon,” the mayor replied.

Melicent suddenly remembered her own engagement for this morning. Should she lose her chance of seeing and warning “ Ishmael ” ? Manch would be waiting to show her the way. This opportunity might be of the utmost importance. If she waited till another time her going might be too late. She turned to her husband.

“ Don’t let me take you away from your business, Aleck ; I can ride home alone.”

“ No, no ! I shall attend you, of course. I can come here to-morrow.”

“ But perhaps you had better remain. I am sure—”

She stopped, for he looked into her face so sharply as to disconcert her. He had read its expression, and interpreted it to mean reluctance to have him accompany her.

“ Since you wish it, you can go alone,” he said, with a cold flash of the blue eye that had grown so soft a moment ago.

He helped her to her saddle in silence. As she took the riding-whip from his hand, she bent down and said gently :

“ You are not offended, Aleck ? Indeed, I did not mean—”

He inclined his head courteously and drew back from her side.

“It is of no importance,” he said. “Be sure to take the lower road; the upper one goes too near the river and is dangerous.”

He walked back to the mill, and she rode away with a burdened heart.

“Luck’s dead against me, as Manch would say,” she thought. “I would not go alone from home this morning for fear Colonel Archer would want to accompany me, or at least would watch and find out where I went. I trusted to some fortunate chance to furnish me a pretext to Aleck for prolonging my ride alone as we returned; but, after that unlucky adventure of the wheel, I knew he would be sure to insist upon my going straight home with him. I’ve done a worse thing after all—wounded my husband’s feelings and increased that shadow of distrust that has fallen over his love for me. Alas! I feel I am fated to lose his confidence and destroy his affection!”

She pressed her lids together to keep back the tears that burned under them. In spite of her efforts, a few drops fell upon her cheeks and were kissed off by the wind as she rode rapidly on.

But Melicent’s nature was too elastic for any brooding despondency. Her natural hopefulness soon asserted its rule. Her spirits rose as she rode on under the soft, hazy sky, noting with her usual ready sympathy the different phases of human life she encountered, and hearing the birds sing in the trees of the cottage yards.

She had meant to avoid passing the house where she had seen Colonel Archer that morning, fearing he might still be there and might observe the direction she took—perhaps, follow her; but before she was aware of it, she was close to the cottage, and saw in the yard just before

her the dark, bold-looking girl standing near the low paling and talking to a man on the outside. She was differently dressed now, wearing a coquettish scarlet jacket, with a red rose in her hair, and her round arms and small hands showing to advantage as they were clasped over the silken-haired dog she was holding and fondling as she talked. The man upon the outside, leaning his elbows on the low fence, was so absorbed in looking at and listening to her that he did not see Melicent until she was within a few feet of him. Then he turned round and stared at her a moment with that puzzled, wondering look with which he had regarded her before—for the man was Gabriel Griffin. Melicent's appearance stirred some faint memory that seemed vaguely to trouble him, while she was disturbed at the encounter. She knew from Colonel Archer's report that Gabriel Griffin was as much as ever one of the pariahs of society—shunning and hating it as it shunned and hated him. What was he doing here, having a familiar, lover-like interview with a woman whom an hour or two ago she had seen engaged in deep and what seemed secret conference with Colonel Archer? Was it merely a coincidence, or did it bear some relation to the plot Colonel Archer assured her he had formed for detecting Neil?

“I must let him tell me what this plot is,” Melicent said to herself; “I see no other way to forestall him.”

CHAPTER VII.

DRAWING her veil about her face, and avoiding the principal streets which ran parallel with the river, Melicent took her way through the back part of the town, and, riding rapidly, soon came out of it on the lower side. It was built mainly upon the point made by that curve of the river known as "Bear's Bend." The little settlement of that name had been located lower down, and more within the bend. Passing the few dilapidated cabins that now marked the site of this earlier settlement, Melicent at length came to the bayou she was in search of, and found the road Manch had described as following its course until within a short distance of Ishmael's cottage. She kept the road for nearly a mile, riding at a moderate pace, looking about her and listening attentively. A man driving an ox-wagon with vociferous threats and deafening appeals to his cattle; an old woman riding in to market, with a dressed pig strapped behind her, and a lap full of noisy chickens; a couple of boys with a pack of dogs at their heels, carrying guns half as long as themselves, and a poor little cat-bird or two by way of game—these were all Melicent saw upon the road. She was beginning to look and listen a little anxiously for Manch, when a sound that had once been familiar caught her ear—the bugle-like note produced by blowing upon a rustic instrument made of reeds. It proceeded from the belt of woods bordering the bayou, and Melicent at once turned into it. It was a strip of hummock such as only Western streams can show: huge trunks of ash, sycamore, and cottonwood, with enormous wild vines running up their

sides, and masses of long gray moss floating from their limbs and moving slowly in the wind. Reaching the bayou, Melicent rode along the steep bank in the direction of the bugle-note. Suddenly it ceased, and soon after the clear, cheery chirp of a frog came up as if from the water. At the same time a bunch of wild grapes tumbled into Melicent's lap. Looking around, she espied the brown little face and the keen eyes of Manch peering from the foliage of a limb that overhung the water. He drew in his fishing-line, and, running along the limb like a squirrel, was soon at her horse's side.

"Don't I make a pretty good frog?" he asked. "And ain't I a high hand on a home-made flute? I blowed myself hoarse and caught a string of perch besides, waiting for you. If you had broke your promise—"

"You would have known it was out of my power to keep it. I am not mistress of circumstances, Manch. But here I am; and now, where is the fisherman's hut?"

"This way," he cried. "We must cross the bayou; it's not saddle-skirt deep to your horse this time o' year."

"And how will you cross?"

"Yonder's a good enough bridge for me and the coons," he said, pointing to a fallen tree that spanned the water.

When they had crossed, he led the way and Melicent followed, controlling her agitation and composing her features as best she might. Manch stopped before a group of trees so thickly draped with moss that only glimpses could be had of the little black hut within.

"Here it is," he said; "looks like a squirrel's nest. Listen," he went on; "ain't that beautiful? Ishmael's been feedin' his birds, and now he's coaxin' 'em to sing.

Did you ever hear any whistlin' like that? Beats harmonicas and Jews'-harps all hollow. I'd give everything in my bank if I could whistle like that."

Melicent remembered Neil's whistling in times past, but it had not impressed her as this did now. It was wonderful—clear and pure as a bird's note, but with a yearning melancholy in it that no bird's note ever had. Presently the "coaxin'" was successful; the mocking-bird trilled out deliciously, and the whistling ceased.

"Come on," said Manch, parting the drapery of moss. Melicent entered the narrow open space in front of the cabin. Ishmael was sitting outside upon a bench with his bird-cages before him. His face was turned from Melicent as he leaned on his elbow and listened to his bird, so that she saw at first only the remembered figure in an old gray jacket with loose outlines. The long hair fell upon his neck; it was darker and longer than of old, and it was slightly mixed with gray, but had still its wavy abundance.

"Ishmael," said Manch, "here's the lady who give us the pictures and that bought my birds."

He looked around suddenly with that startled, deer-like glance—intensified now into the look of a trapped animal that sees the hunter approaching. The expression was momentary; as it passed, he rose and bowed to Melicent with the simple, childlike grace that had always been his.

"She has come to see your birds. She will get down and hear Constant sing," said Manch.

He came up to her and offered his hand to assist her in dismounting. Melicent almost feared to take it, her own was trembling so. She could not believe but he

must recognize her. She would have known him anywhere, though he was changed. She wondered why others did not recognize him in spite of the beard that partially concealed his features, that had been beardless as a boy's when she saw him last. She did not remember at the time that even without this disguise it was not likely he would be recognized by those who believed him dead, and in whose minds his image and even the memory of his existence had been dimmed by the lapse of time and the influx of newer images and incidents.

Yes, he was changed; there were alterations in the face she remembered so well; but every change had seemed to deepen its pathetic character. The lines traced in the forehead, the sad droop of the lids, the grave wistfulness and childlike candor of his eyes, the thinness and paleness of his cheek, the silver streaks in his hair—all these she noticed with deep emotion, while her own face remained partly shaded by the veil she had not put aside.

She sat down with Manch and Ishmael, and the mocking-bird sang to them, and she caressed it with her slender, ungloved fingers; and all the while she was thinking how she should speak the words she had come to say—the warning of danger, the offer of means to get out of its reach.

At last she said, as Constant, perched upon her finger, picked at the grapes she held:

“They are great company to you. No wonder you dislike to part with them. You call this one Constant; what is the name of his mate?”

She had not spoken before. At the first word she uttered he looked up quickly; his large eyes fastened

themselves upon her face with a troubled, questioning gaze, such as she had seen in Gabriel, only more intense, and shading off into an expression of profound despondency. Melicent understood the look. Her face had touched the chords of memory, but their echoes had said, "The face which hers resembles has long since been dust." He had no suspicion of the truth. She was not recognized, and Melicent drew a deep breath: was it altogether of relief, or did a feeling of regret mingle with it and make it almost a sigh?

Ishmael roused himself after a moment's abstraction, and answered the question she had asked.

"I call her different pet names," he said evasively.

Manch had told her that he called this favorite bird "Milly," but it seemed he could not speak that name at this moment.

"You must be lonely here," said Melicent, feeling that she must say something to the point; for time was passing, and she dreaded the thought of her husband returning and finding her away after what had occurred that morning. "You must be lonely here; this is a gloomy spot, and Manch tells me you have traveled and seen many beautiful places: would you not rather live at some of these?"

"All places are pretty much alike to me," he answered. "The same sun shines on them, the same sky hangs over them, and we walk under it with the same heart in our bosom. Places don't alter feelings."

"But there are places more profitable to live at—where you could make more money, I mean."

"I make all I need here; my wants are few," he answered, looking up from the bird he fondled, and smiling

a sweet and patient smile that went to Melicent's heart. She was silent for a moment, hesitating how else to urge her desire that he should leave this place. Then she bent nearer to him, her face still shaded, and said impressively :

"But suppose you are in danger here—watched for and liable to be taken and—persecuted—would it not be better to go away?"

He gave a start of surprise; his hand involuntarily clutched his breast; his eyes met hers with that look of wild trouble and appealing.

"You know it, then," he said huskily. "So they have found me out."

"No. No one knows but me. I trust no one ever will find out; but—they are in search of you—they are here—at this place. You know this, do you not?"

"They told me there were men hunting me—that they were close on my track," he said, pressing his hand to his forehead in a weary, bewildered way. "But I could not make it real; it has been a kind of nightmare with me so long—this feeling of being hunted down—it seems the danger must be a dream still."

"It is too real," murmured Melicent, "and you must go away soon, and secretly—for your life's sake."

"It's not worth it. I am tired wandering about like a wounded buffalo hunting a safe place to die in. I had rather die and be buried here. I don't want to go away; I want to rest."

How wearied he looked as he raised his head, and his great, sad eyes roved around an instant, and then dropped until their long lashes fell upon his cheek! Melicent with difficulty kept back her tears.

"You give up your hold on life so easily," she said ; "you should have hope ; you are yet young."

"If you reckon age by years ; but I take it we have all our track measured off. I've gone over mine ; I've passed all the milestones—love, and happiness, and hope even. There's but one left for me, and that's one we've all got to pass. It don't matter how or when I get to that. There's nobody to care but Manch and my dumb family here ; they'd miss me a little—wouldn't you, Bunch?" he said, stroking the sleek head of the little ground-squirrel, that had at first slyly peeped out of his coat-pocket, then ran up his arm and crouched upon his shoulder, eying him with head on one side.

"How shall I rouse him?" Melicent thought. "He is sunk in a kind of apathy. He will not realize the danger until it is too late."

"I thought to find you more prudent," she said, after a pause. "I thought I could make you feel the necessity of going away ; and if you had not the means, I would furnish it."

"You?" he said, looking up wonderingly at her ; "why should you give anything to me?"

Melicent was glad of the friendly shield of lace that half screened her face from the scrutiny of those truth-compelling eyes ; but she answered earnestly :

"Why should one human being do anything for another? Are we not bound to feel for and to help each other by our very nature of humanity?" Then glancing around and seeing that Manch, who had gone off, had not returned, she continued : "The boy Manch interested me in your fate. I like him ; he is true-hearted. I found out from him, inadvertently, that you were his best

friend. I had heard your story—a portion of it at least—from another source; I can not tell you about it now.”

“You did not hear it all,” he said, slowly shaking his head, “or you wouldn’t interest yourself about me. You didn’t hear what a wretch I was—a—a murderer?”

“Yes.”

“That I killed an old man for his money?”

“Yes, I have heard it all, and I believe you innocent.”

“You believe me innocent? No, nobody believes that unless it’s Manch—not my own mother and brother. No, that can’t be.”

“Yes, it is,” said Melicent; “I do not believe you guilty—and I have heard it all.”

He was silent; his lips moved, but he did not speak audibly. A change seemed to pass over him. He lifted his head more erectly than he had done before; a flush mounted to his pale cheek; his eye brightened. It was as though hope, and the energy of life that is born of hope, had been suddenly kindled in his breast by the knowledge that one being believed in him. He seemed about to speak, but before he did so Manch came running up and went close to Melicent.

“Did you ever see a heron’s egg?” he asked, putting one into her hand. As she took it, he said, in a rapid whisper:

“There’s somebody coming down the road—they’ll come here, maybe. Go into the house, and I’ll put your horse out of sight.” Turning round, he said aloud: “Ishmael, show the lady the curious bones and rock things you brought from Californy.”

"Would she like to look at them?" Ishmael said, and led the way into the house, Manch remaining without.

They had hardly entered when a man on horseback rode up to the door. Melicent trembled with dread, while her cheeks burned with indignation, for the voice was that of Colonel Archer. He had actually followed her there.

"Hillo, boy!" he cried; "has a lady been here?"

"What's the row?" drawled Manch, leisurely turning round from the fishing-line he was fixing.

"Has a lady on horseback been here, or have you caught sight of one passing?"

"Caught what?"

"Sight of a lady, I told you."

"Dunno about them critters; I've caught a lot of fish, though. Don't you want to buy 'em?—all fresh and flopping."

"Damn your impudence! Who said anything about fish? I asked if a lady came here or passed."

"One *might* a' passed," said Manch reflectively, as he stopped trimming the lead-sinker on his line, and put his forefinger on his chin. "I've been fishin' in the bayou down there, and what with the plaguey minnows a-keep-in' your cork bobbin', and the mosketoes playin' tunes under your nose, a body hasn't much chance to look out for ladies."

"You are either a fool or you pretend to be one. Where's the man who lives here?"

"Oh! he's some better, thank 'ee. We don't much think it's the small-pox he's got, but there's no tellin'. Would you step in and see him? Maybe you're the doctor."

The man wheeled his horse and rode off, muttering an imprecation. Manch called out after him, "You didn't say whether you'd take the fish!" but he made no reply. The boy indulged in a quiet little chuckle as soon as his questioner was out of hearing. Putting his head in at the door, he asked:

"How's your small-pox, Ishmael? A newsboy read me something in a paper that put me up to that dodge. Now, I'll go for your horse, lady; I hid him in the old nigger fisherman's hen-house."

"Who was that man?" asked Ishmael. "Is he one of them you said were on my track?"

"Yes, he is the principal one. You may guess how bloodthirsty when I tell you that he is the murdered man's son. And you will stay here and put yourself in his power?"

"I have changed my mind," he said slowly, the light of hope that had so suddenly kindled in his eyes still showing there. "I'll try to escape—as some acknowledgment of your kindness, if nothing else. I thank you for that kindness with all my heart. I'll not need to take your money, I think. These things" (pointing to the collection of fossils, crystals, and curious petrifications that she had been looking at) "are worth something to scientific folks and museum people, so I've been told. They'll, maybe, bring some money—enough to get away. I'll get the boy to sell them to-morrow."

"I'll buy them now," said Melicent.

"To-morrow—I will send them to-morrow," he interrupted, as though wishing to make a delay.

Reluctance to any change seemed to be the ruling feeling in his mind. Melicent comprehended the feeling

—the helpless, unnerved weariness of the man—tired of aimless wandering, tired of flying from the nightmare of being “hunted down”; broken in health, worse than broken in spirits, though not yet thirty years of age; asking nothing of his fellow beings but permission to live out the remainder of his life in the society of his dumb friends and of the child who had so strangely attached himself to his desolate fortunes, and to be buried at last near what he supposed to be the grave of the wife he had loved so well.

Melicent felt all this as she looked around the poor room and noted all its humble details—a bench, a home-made table, a pallet bed, a box for the squirrel in one corner, in the other a violin, the work of Ishmael’s own hands, and carved and finished with much ingenuity. On the table was a little book in old-fashioned leather binding. Melicent took it up, and, struck by a sudden memory, turned to the fly-leaf. Her heart beat painfully; a dizzy feeling half blinded her, as she read there, “*To Neil from Milly,*” in the irregular, unskilled handwriting that had once been hers. She remembered that she had given him this little Testament the first day of their marriage, and he had always carried it about him. He was learning to read of her, and she recollected how proud both teacher and pupil were when he was able to read his first chapter in the Testament. When she could command herself, she turned to Ishmael.

“Is not this a telltale?” she asked gently. “Ought you not to tear out the leaf?”

He caught up the book passionately.

“Never!” he cried; “I’ll never tear out that. It’ll be buried with me just like it is.”

He put it in his bosom and clasped his arms over it ; his mouth quivered with emotion.

Melicent could not have spoken after this. She shook hands with him in silence. When she parted with Manch, he said to her :

“Go back by the road you came. *He* come that way just now ; but he’s gone back by the other road—round by granny’s house. He’s thinking to find you.”

“He must have seen me come out of town,” Melicent thought, as she gave free rein to her horse and went homeward at a rapid rate. As she was turning into the street on which she lived, a horseman turned the opposite corner, crossed over and rode up beside her.

“My fair runaway,” said Colonel Archer, bending lightly in his saddle, “how did you manage to elude me this morning?”

“Did I make an appointment to ride with you, Colonel?” she asked haughtily.

“Not exactly ; but when I suggested the disagreeableness, not to say impropriety, of your riding alone, and coming back with headaches, you acquiesced—by your eloquent silence, if in no other way.”

“I went out this morning with my husband.”

“But returned without that useful appendage, and rode away at your own sweet will, in altogether another direction.”

“I am grateful for the interest you manifest in my movements. You must take great pains to watch them.”

“A little bird told me of them this time, however ; but when I mounted my horse and hastened to overtake you, in the fullness of good intentions, you spirited your-

self away—vanished, horse and rider, like a lady in a fairy tale.”

“I have the gift of being invisible when I wish,” said Melicent pointedly.

“Which means that you desire to be invisible to me?”

Melicent, in her heart, wished she could turn upon him and frankly answer “Yes”; but how could she with poor Ishmael’s face fresh in her mind, and her knowledge that his safety might depend on her keeping friendly with this man? She lifted her eyes to Colonel Archer—proud eyes, but soft with unshed tears—and made her appeal:

“Colonel Archer, I entreat you, as a gentleman, to cease such trifling; it wounds my self-respect. I do not want to offend you. I would like you to be a friend to me in a straightforward, honest way.” She stopped, and then added impressively: “There are things I may do that will seem singular—imprudent, perhaps; things I would not do but for the force of circumstances. Don’t misinterpret them, please—and don’t presume upon them.”

A purer and less passionate man would have appreciated this appeal, with its tone of mildness and its undertone of repressed but strong displeasure. It clouded Colonel Archer’s face one moment with chagrin and disappointment. But her eyes were so beautiful, flashing through soft tearfulness, and his mind was so set upon believing its own wishes to be truth, that he consoled himself, and let vanity and cynicism put their interpretation on Melicent’s words.

“She is trying to keep me at bay,” he thought. “She is afraid of me—afraid of herself as well. She is so firm because she is conscious of weakness.”

Still her words were not altogether without effect, and he was not wholly insincere when he bowed his head and murmured :

“You shall be obeyed. In turn, you must bear with me. I told you what lawless company and a wild life had made of me. Smile now, to show that you pardon me.”

Smile she did, but the smile was short-lived, for at that moment they rode up to the gate of the mayor's house, and Melicent saw her husband looking at them from the porch. She thought with a pang how he must regard her conduct of this morning. Colonel Archer said “Good-by” at the gate ; he had lately taken lodgings at an hotel in another part of the town, in order to be with a friend, he told Mr. Avery.

Melicent went in and approached her husband as he walked slowly up and down the piazza with an open letter in his hand.

“Have you been long at home, Aleck ?” she asked.

“Nearly an hour,” was the cold reply.

She determined to speak a word of explanation, notwithstanding his discouraging manner.

“The day was so fine I concluded to prolong my ride,” she said. “I rode down the river and stopped at a fisherman's hut, and bought some crystals and curious petrifications that I think you will like for your cabinet. The boy will bring them to-morrow. I rode alone ; I did not meet Colonel Archer until just now, at the corner of the street.”

He stopped, and there was a struggle in his mind. He wanted to throw off the burden of suspicion, as unworthy of himself and her ; he chafed under it with proud scorn ; but an impalpable something held him back. He did

not know what this undefinable barrier might be ; he was only conscious of the restraint it exercised over him. In truth, it was his instinctive perception of the shadow of secrecy that had risen between Melicent and himself. He felt that there was something he did not share—that there was an alienation, a want of openness in what she said and did. It was this that checked the impulse to put his arm around her in the old, tender fashion, and talk to her freely and fondly as she shared his favorite promenade in the latticed gallery. Instead of this, he said :

“I think they are about to serve dinner. You will barely have time to get ready.”

CHAPTER VIII.

TRUE to his word, Manch found his way to Melicent's room next morning, with the curiosities packed in one of Ishmael's neatest baskets.

“I bring bad news,” he said, as he put his burden down upon the table ; “Ishmael's sick to-day.”

“Sick !” exclaimed Melicent, with much concern.

“Yes ; you know it turned to raining yesterday toward evenin', and I had to go home in it, or I'd catch it from granny. Ishmael would take off his coat and wrap me in it, and so he took cold. That's how it come, I reckon. He has pains in his limbs and the cramp in his right leg. It's the same old complaint that takes him every now and then ever since it fastened on him that time he come nigh freezin' to death in the mountains—trapped up there by the Ingins, you know.”

“I am very sorry,” Melicent said. “Has he a doctor, Manch?”

“Save us! no he doctors himself, what doctorin’ he gits. He never complains nor says a word; only turns white about the gills when the pain’s on him. He says he will be well in a day or two, and he told me to bring you these; he’d promised to send ’em, and to tell you to do what you liked with ’em; they wasn’t worth much.”

Melicent took them out of the basket and ranged them on the table before her. There were some beautiful crystals, a few Indian relics that looked as though they would be valuable to an antiquarian, and some petrified curiosities and geological specimens, among them two small but remarkable pieces of fossil. Manch, with his hands in his jacket-pockets, surveyed them as they were arranged on the table, and then, letting his eye rove around the room, seemed to compare them with the pretty ornaments of silver filagree, Bohemian glass, and Sèvres china that were scattered about over the toilet-stand and the mantel.

“They’re a mean-looking lot,” he said at last—“beneath your notice that has so many prettier things. I don’t s’pose they’re worth gnat-heels to you.”

“I am not learned enough to know their value. They may be worth a great deal more than I can give. We will see what is the best I can do.”

She took out her purse from a bottom compartment of her pearl-inlaid work-box, and emptied its contents on the table before her. She counted it carefully, and found seventy dollars in gold and two bank-notes of ten dollars each.

“It is not as much as I thought,” she said regretfully

as she returned the money to the purse and put it into Manch's hands. His big eyes opened wide.

"You give all this to Ishmael!" he exclaimed—"all this for that rubbish?"

"The rubbish, as you call it, may be worth more for aught I can tell. I only buy it for Ishmael's sake; he would not take the money without some return. I wish it was more, but it is all I have; I trust it may be enough to get him away."

"But he can't go now. He's not able to move about; and then I think he's lost heart a'ready by his looks. Your talk yesterday helped him up mightily; but he's dropped back again like a squirrel with a broken leg. I've known 'em to peep out a little way and then lose heart and drop back in their hollow and starve and die there."

The childlike comparison touched Melicent. Her voice trembled as she said:

"We must try to put heart in him again."

"I tell you what I think," said Manch, coming close to Melicent and speaking earnestly; "it's the thought of goin' out among people and havin' them stare at him, and of mixin' with the noise and bustle at the depot, that scares Ishmael—kinder makes him want to draw back in his gray old hole among the moss and trees. You see, people ain't been overly good to him. They've crippled his life, as you may say, so he dreads 'em as the wounded squirrel does the hawks and varmints."

"He need not mix with the people on the cars," said Melicent. "He might get a horse and ride away in what direction he pleased."

"That's the very idee!" cried the boy. "Ishmael would like that better'n anything. I know where I can

buy him a pony for fifty dollars, and that'd leave enough of the money to get him to some safe place, where he might settle down and feel like he was at home."

He stopped abruptly, and his eager face clouded.

"Oh, poor Ishmael!" he burst out. "How can he ever feel at home anywhere? He'll be always hearin' the hounds after him, and what'll he do for somebody to care for him and make him laugh sometimes, like me and Constant and Bunch? Oh, poor Ishmael! he'll pine to death. He says right—there's no rest for him this side the grave."

His little chest heaved, and the tears ran over his cheeks in spite of himself. Melicent drew his head to her knee and wept with him—tears of sympathy that were somehow mixed with the bitterer drops of remorseful tenderness. She wiped them away after a little while, and said gently, as she stroked the boy's head:

"This is helping Ishmael, is it?"

"No," said Manch, rising; "I must go back and tell him about the horse we are to get, and pack his old wallet for him. But, then, I'm afeared he won't be able to stand the travel yet awhile."

"If he could only get away from where he is! Don't you know of any out-of-the-way place, Manch, where he might be better hid, and still be tolerably comfortable, until he is well enough to ride?"

Manch thought a moment.

"There's one place," he said, "where nobody ever goes. The boldest and mischievest boys dassent climb into it; and the rats, the bats, and the ghostesses has it all to theirselves. That's the old haunted block-house at the cross-roads, up the river a piece, where there's been

murders, and hangin's, and killin' by Ingin tomahawks, and all kind of bloody doin's. If Ishmael could git into that old den, they'd hardly look for him there."

Melicent shuddered involuntarily. It was near that house that the murder was committed of which he was accused; it was there she had seen him hanging—gasp—ing, struggling in death; it was there that people pointed out his grave—there, on that fatal hill. Would he meet his death there at last—tracked by the hounds of the law, sick and unable to escape? Would he be caught like a rat in a trap in that dreary, half-rotten old building—the haunted block-house?

"You don't think it a good hiding-place?" asked Manch, noticing the expression on Melicent's face.

"Yes, I do," she answered; "it was not that made me hesitate. How shall we get him there? He could manage to ride as far as the block-house; it's not more than two miles from the river, is it?"

"Not so far, I don't think."

"But you ought to have some one to help you."

"I can get Gabriel, maybe; but—"

"No, don't apply to Gabriel—don't give him any hint of what you are about," said Melicent, remembering what she had seen at the cottage of the Frenchwoman.

"All right; I was goin' to say Gabriel's curus of late. He's had a fallin' out with granny and quit comin' to our house. He wanted her to give him a five-dollar gold piece that she's saving, she says, for a nest-egg; and he got mad as blazes when she wouldn't, and said he'd soon have gold a-plenty and be able to say good-by to these diggin's. No, I can manage to help Ishmael up."

"Can you go to-night?"

"If Ishmael ain't too bad off."

"You can get my horse. Come for it late—about twilight. I will tell my husband I lent it to you to move a sick man. And you will have to take provisions with you, Manch."

"I'll have to go there first and fix some contrivance to get up into the block-house. It's pretty high up off the ground, you know, and no sign of steps. I'll make a ladder; take a hatchet and a pocket full of nails along, and cut two poles and tack pieces across. I'll do that to-day, and I'll come for the horse to-night if Ishmael's well enough to go. If not, I'll come to-morrow and let you know. I'll go now; I reckon Ishmael's wanted a gourd of fresh water from the spring before this."

"Stop a moment; here is something to put in your empty basket."

Melicent took off a napkin from a waiter that stood on the table and displayed its tempting contents.

"I had no appetite for breakfast this morning, and my old cook sent up an early lunch, thinking to tempt me with dainties. I thought of your coming, and let it stay; but I know you had rather take it to your sick friend than eat it yourself."

"Oh! a heap rather!" said the boy, watching her with pleased eyes as she transferred the broiled chicken, the amber jelly, the slices of sponge-cake, and the delicate rolls from the waiter into his basket.

"There," she said; "you will not have to cook dinner for Ishmael to-day. When you come to-morrow, I will have a basketful ready for you to take to the block-house. I will sit down right away and think over what necessary things I can put up in small parcels."

But this she was not permitted to do; for as Manch finished putting back the grape-leaves over the top of the basket, Flora entered with the cards of some visitors, strangers to her, but friends of her husband.

"Mighty fine-dressed folks," commented the girl; "and come in a carriage most as fine as de mayor's.—Come along with you, little boy; lem me show you out de back way," she continued, looking scornfully at Manch, and wondering at her lady's penchant for ragged urchins.

The day was drawing to a close, the guests had taken their departure, and Melicent sat alone in the drawing-room in the shadow of the deepening twilight. She had been walking the gallery with restless steps, anxiously impatient for the appearance of Manch. But he did not come; and, with an effort at self-control, she sat down to the piano, and, musingly touching the keys, recalled the air she had heard Ishmael whistle. It seemed a familiar one. She felt she must have known it in that other life when she was mistress of a cabin home and sang at her work as happy as a soulless bird. She was wandering in that bewildering past when, lifting her eyes by some sudden impulse, she saw in the dim light a tall figure beside her. That brought her back to the present with a disagreeable shock.

"Colonel Archer," she said coldly, as she rose and stood before him, "I was not aware of your presence; I did not hear you announced."

"I beg pardon," he said, bowing with his mocking grace; "I announce myself—in this instance. I could not make myself heard at your hall-door. Do not let me interrupt you; finish your song."

"Is it a song?" asked Melicent, curious to know. "I do not remember the words. I heard it somewhere, and it impressed me singularly."

"If it impressed you, it must have been in some previous stage of existence, before your heart had petrified into marble as it now has, for the song is a mournful little love ballad, old as the hills."

He leaned over as he stood, struck the chords of the piano with his firm, well-shaped hand, and sang:

"Oh! take me to your arms, my love,
For keen the wind doth blow;
Oh! take me to your arms, love,
For bitter is my woe."

Instantly Melicent remembered the whole ballad—remembered Neil and herself singing it when they sat in their doorway at sunset, or when they rested in the woods. The rush of recollection confused her. She turned cold and pale.

"It is late," she said; "I will ring for lights."

"No; I beg you will not spoil this soft twilight. Here," he said, sweeping back the curtain, "come and see how light it is still, and what a delicate purple radiance is reflected from that host of amethyst clouds that a while ago were so gorgeous with gold and crimson. What a grand sunset it was!—suggestive of St. John's apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem. It quite solemnized me."

"You?" queried Melicent, incredulously.

"Certainly. Don't fancy me altogether a pagan or a boor. I read a little in the Bible as well as everything else."

“But you skipped the sentence, ‘Vengeance is mine—I will repay, saith the Lord,’” replied Melicent softly.

“I understand you; but I think that sentence, like the one telling us ‘The Lord will provide,’ is to be taken provisionally, at least. For instance, when you have waited eight years for the Lord to repay with vengeance, and he has not done it, the interest rolls up considerably, and you had better take matters into your own hand, and settle the score at once.”

“Is there a prospect of your settling the score at once?” asked Melicent, playing with the tassel of the curtain.

“I—think—so,” he said slowly, nodding his head and watching her.

“Any new developments?” inquired Melicent, with assumed carelessness; but her color came and went, and she leaned against the window-frame and bent her beautiful head and neck a little forward in her eagerness.

She made a lovely picture in that tinted light. Colonel Archer thought so, and he bent nearer her and looked at her with bold admiration.

“I am a little afraid to tell you,” he said; “you might play traitress.”

“You distrust me?” returned Melicent, coloring with a sense of duplicity.

“Women are unaccountable creatures; and you especially are an enigma, as I told you once—an enigma that, by the way, I swore to solve. What is one to think, for instance, of a suddenly developed proclivity for the society of old hags, and half-witted girls, and ragged boys? And when we consider that this fancy is taken up by a high-bred beauty whose face might belong to a princess?

And the face can set itself hard enough against some people—your humble slave, for instance. No; I am afraid your heart is not with me in my detective scheme.”

“Indeed, I am deeply interested in it, and you will remember you promised to keep me informed of any new phases of it or any further discoveries.”

“I have not forgotten. Indeed, there have been no further discoveries. We have been disappointed and baffled, but I do not despair. Just now I have a new clew—a slender thread, but it may lead to the truth. It is but a sentence, in fact—mysterious as the Delphic oracles.”

“Let me have it; I am good at interpreting. Say, was your oracle delivered with a French accent from a shrine where a parrot and a poodle were the ‘familiar,’ instead of the owl and the raven, or the black cat of ancient witchcraft?”

He gave her one of his keen glances.

“Why do you ask that?” he queried sharply. “You know, then. How the devil did you find out? That is mysterious again.”

“I hate mysteries,” said Melicent. “I have not found out anything. I recognized you yesterday when I rode by. You were talking to a dark little lady in a pink wrapper.”

“Mademoiselle Maline, the pretty French fortune-teller, astrologist, spiritualist—Heaven only knows what besides!—humbuggist, most likely. I remember I was talking to her as you passed.”

“Yes, I heard—”

“Heard!” he exclaimed quickly, as Melicent paused; “what did you hear?”

"Oh! nothing; a fragment of conversation without connection. What information did she give you about the murderer?"

"I did not say she gave me any."

"Pardon me; you did not. I merely meant to ask what was that enigmatical clew you spoke of just now."

"It was simply this—that the truth I wanted to know lay no deeper than a fish-basket."

"That is mysterious indeed," returned Melicent, well concealing her alarm; "mysterious and unmeaning."

"Not altogether unmeaning; and I am promised an interpretation to-morrow, or the next day at latest. Let me tell you how it came to be spoken—or rather," he corrected himself, hesitating and speaking more cautiously, "let me give you a skeleton sketch of the way it came up. I won't give you the details at present; I will wait to see how the plot works. Getting at even that bit of clew was the result of magic—sorcery of the old, old sort that Delilah and Cleopatra understood—the magic of bright eyes and sweet, deceitful lips. When champagne and witching smiles had wrought the preliminary charms, my sorceress recounts her accomplishments, and mentions among them the art of finding out lost or buried treasures—under certain circumstances. She has been told that there is a great treasure hid hereabout—robbed from a murdered miner years ago. She has reason to *know* that it was buried or hid near the place of the murder, and that the murderer forgot to mark the spot and could not identify it afterward, or he would have done so in order to save his life when it was offered him by the hangmen on the condition that he disclosed where the money was. Ah! it was a great treasure of gold and

diamonds, and her art could show where it was hid but for one thing."

"And what was that?" was eagerly questioned.

"'It took truth to bring forth truth,' says my sorceress oracularly. She must know the truth of the whole proceeding, else her art is vain. Some say the murderer, or the man accused of the murder, was hanged, but not till he was dead, and that he still lives. She must know the truth about this. If he is still alive, she must know where he is, and must have a bit of his hair or a piece of his clothing 'to set the charm'; if he is dead, a handful of dirt from his grave will answer the purpose. Oh! if she only knew and could find the treasure, how happy it would make her! She could then be rich enough to marry the man of her choice, and fly with him to her native land across the sea, where hearts are warmer, and where malice and prejudice and scandal would not come. You see the bait, madame."

"Yes," said Melicent; "but nothing yet about the fisherman's basket."

"Ah! I am coming to that. When my sorceress lifts her black eyes to her—victim, we will say, for want of a word—and cries melodramatically, 'The truth, the truth!—how shall I find the truth of the matter? Shall I find it by looking into your eyes, monsieur? They are deep and dark as wells, and they say truth lies at the bottom of a well.' 'Perhaps this truth does not lie so deep,' was the reply. 'Not so deep? How deep, then?' 'At the bottom of a fish-basket,' was the answer. And then—"

"What then?"

"Why, then there was an unlucky interruption, and the spell was broken off for the time. But to-morrow it

shall be renewed, and it is odd if wine and female arts do not wile the secret from the bottom of the fish-basket, or wherever it is."

"At the bottom of a fish-basket!" repeated Melicent scornfully. "There is not much to be made of that."

"Do you think so? I will tell you what I make of it. I take it to mean that the man Neil Griffin is hanging about here as a fisherman—disguised, perhaps, as a negro or an Indian. There are several of that kind living here, selling fish and turtle that they catch in their nets and traps. I have an eye of suspicion upon three different individuals in and around town. One of them may prove the right coon. If I don't succeed in getting that interpretation by to-morrow, I shall go promptly to work and follow up the clew of the fish-basket."

"And is this really all the clew you have?"

"All. I did not mean to tell you until there was something more definite; but do you not see?—I can not keep anything from you. You have the key of my heart, and you unlock it at will."

The words were heard by an ear they were not meant for. Mr. Avery stood in the doorway and looked darkly at the two at the window, whose faces were turned from him. As Colonel Archer's last words fell on his ear, his eye flashed and he stepped rapidly into the room. But, before he could speak, Colonel Archer turned round and nodded with easy friendliness.

"Isn't that so, Avery?" he said. "Isn't it true that these women worm our secrets out of us in spite of our better judgment? Here's your lady has just unlocked my breast with the silver key of her tongue and let a small secret escape into her keeping, though I am well

aware you will be the possessor of it before to-morrow, and will chaff me unmercifully. So I'll forestall her story and tell you myself what there is to tell. She saw me yesterday, as she and you rode by, consulting the pretty French fortune-teller in her cottage on Welcome Street, and she insists that I was bidding her

‘Make, not mar my fate,
My fortune was her own’;

and I have pleaded guilty to the soft impeachment, urging in excuse that Mademoiselle Maline is a bewitching little Circe. Is she not?”

“I have not observed her,” Mr. Avery said coldly. He was not satisfied with the explanation, for Melicent’s flushed cheek and clouded eyes did not tally with this light account. But he could not openly gainsay it. Colonel Archer’s manner was the perfection of careless, half-ironical jesting, with which it would seem folly to be angry.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Melicent was alone and could think coherently she determined upon two things: First, that Ishmael must be removed from where he was. If he was not well enough to travel, he must be helped away to some safer place. She felt sure that he was one of the three fishermen that Colonel Archer’s “eye of suspicion” had singled out; and she knew that, if attention was once called to him, there were plenty of people living in Alluvia who had known him in Bear’s Bend, and would at once recognize him as Neil Griffin. The block-house, which Manch

had suggested, seemed, upon the whole, the fittest place in which to conceal him until he was better. It was universally shunned, chiefly from custom, growing out of the horrible associations of the place; and it was regarded with superstitious terror by the negroes and ignorant people, whose prying propensities were most to be dreaded. Another circumstance that helped to make the block-house a desirable refuge was the fact that it was difficult to get into, set as it was upon high posts, with the steps that had led up to it long since rotted away. Manch had promised to construct a rough ladder that he could take away when not in use, and hide in the underbrush and high weeds that grew under and around the house.

The other thing that Melicent resolved to do was to see Gabriel Griffin if possible, or to get Manch to tell him of the plot of which he was the tool, and warn him not to betray his brother. She thought of writing to him that night and telling him, but how should she get the note to him? Manch had said that Gabriel was not staying at home lately; and if he were, whom could she trust to take such a note? Not one of the servants. They would make difficulties about finding the house of the Griffins, especially at night; and if they agreed to go, she was by no means sure that they could be relied upon to deliver the note safely. She would have to wait until the morrow, when Manch would certainly come. She trusted nothing would be found out before then; but she was full of apprehension, and sadly disappointed that Manch had not come that evening.

"Ishmael must be worse," she thought, as she sat that night in her white dressing-gown, in a low easy-chair, gazing absently on her hands that were folded in her lap.

Flora was combing out her long hair, and, as she gathered the rich mass in both hands, the girl said :

“ Let me put it up in crimping pins, Miss Melicent, for the ball to-morrow night.”

“ The ball ! ” uttered Melicent, in a tone of annoyance. “ Is it to-morrow night the ball is to be ? ”

“ To be sure, miss ! Is you done forgot ? And your dress such a beauty, and the Stanley young ladies a-comin’ in to-morrow to dress here and go along wid you and de mayor ? Their colored lady, Rose Martin, is comin’ with ’em. She’ll have to get me to fix their sashes and puff their hair. Rose Martin can’t tie a bow genteel to save her, and she don’t know no more about puffin’ hair dan you do about hoein’ pertatoes, Miss Melicent. Everybody praises the way I dresses your hair ; but, then, your hair is so soft and shiny, it looks nice whichever style you put it up. You takes de shine off ’em all, Miss Melicent, I do declar’—both in dress and behavior.”

Flora was disappointed that her flattery had no effect upon its object. Melicent’s clouded brow betrayed anxiety. The ball was a hindrance she had overlooked. She could not decline going to it. It was given by the Bradwells—an influential family, friends of her husband, and expected to be a strong stake in the coming election. The Stanleys, another important family, were coming in from the country to go to the ball, and the young ladies had begged the honor of being chaperoned by Mrs. Avery, as their mamma was a home fixture, and never went beyond the shadow of the house chimneys. Melicent was sure they would come early according to country custom, and that the day would be taken up in efforts to entertain them—in small shopping excursions for their ben-

efit, in eating and dressing—to the exclusion of graver matters that might claim her thought or action.

Next morning, as soon as she was at leisure, she betook herself to making up a number of small parcels of necessary articles to put in Manch's basket when he should arrive. She tied up little packages of tea, sugar, crackers, etc., and put beside them a loaf of bread and one of light cake, some sandwiches, a bottle of wine, and a can or two of condensed soup, brought up from the storeroom.

“Manch can warm it over a few coals; he can make a little fire in the middle of the block-house, on a pile of dirt or a flat stone or two,” she thought, as she tied up the packages with deft fingers, and pleased herself with thinking that if she could have her way, how comfortable she could make Ishmael in the old haunted block-house. She stopped thinking, to smile at herself.

“Clearly, I was never meant for a fine lady,” she said—“I enter with too much zest into the makeshifts of vagabondism.” And then she added softly: “Perhaps I ought to have remained a vagabond. It would have been better than the fate that seems destined for me—that of an unloved, distrusted wife.” Again she stopped and repeated bitterly the word “Wife?—I am not his wife! I have no right to his love—no right to this position, these luxuries! I have no right to anything but the poor discomfort of the fisherman's hut. I shall never feel honest and true again until the truth is known, and I have relinquished the false position I occupy—relinquished, too, my false claim upon a noble man.”

A clock striking the hour of eleven made her suddenly start up and walk to the window anxiously. So late, and

Manch had not yet appeared ! She half resolved to face old Hagar, and ride to the " Wildcat's Den " to inquire about him. She was afraid to visit Ishmael's hut again, lest she should increase the chance of notice and suspicion being drawn to it. While she was debating with herself, the Stanley carriage drove to the door, and she had to descend to the drawing-room and receive the trio of laughing and excited girls, who had come with their tall brother, their bandboxes, and smart mulatto maid, eager for the pleasures of the ball. Lunch was announced soon after ; Melicent thought it would never be over. Then they had an hour of music and chatty examination of the latest magazines, with their fashion-plates and patterns of crochet and bead-work. Still no Manch. Melicent's anxiety became almost too great for outward composure. At last the idea occurred to her, that if she could go to the fortune-teller's, she might find Gabriel there, and have an opportunity of speaking a warning word in his ear. But how should she get off from her guests ? She hit upon an expedient for keeping their attention occupied. She invited them up to her room, and, throwing open armoires, trunks, and boxes, gave them permission to examine her " things." Every woman knows the value of such a privilege—the interest which such an occasion inspires. In a little while the beds, chairs, and tables were strewn with dresses, shawls, hats, mantles, skirts—all the delicate paraphernalia of a lady's wardrobe. Then Melicent said :

" Look at them as much as you please, my dears ; but excuse me if I leave you to yourselves awhile. Flora will show you whatever you care to see."

The girls were well pleased to be left to themselves,

to dip about among the bright confusion of things and chatter like blackbirds over a stubble-field.

Melicent, by her manœuvre having got rid of her maid's prying observation, descended to the library, and put on, unobserved, a loose traveling-wrap which had been hanging behind the door since she wore it last. She doubled a barege veil over her face, and, thus in a manner disguised, went out without attracting attention, and hurriedly took her way to Welcome Street.

Not till she had opened the gate that led into the neglected little door-yard did it strike her what an unusual thing she was about to do in visiting a house whose inmates were most likely people of evil character, and where no reputable women went. What would be thought if it was known? What would her husband think?

The parrot that had been watching her, as it swung head downward in its cage, suddenly righted itself, and screamed discordantly: "Come in—come in, you fool! We'll take you in!"

Its harsh, discordant laugh, its words (capable of double meaning), sounded mocking and ominous, and jarred upon Melicent's excited consciousness. She turned as if to fly, when the door of the house opened and the gay little figure of the fortune-teller appeared on the porch.

"Be quiet, Poll!" she cried, shaking her finger at the parrot. "You are a naughty and impolite bird.—Don't mind her, madam. Enter—enter, I beseech you."

She ran down the steps and met Melicent with smiles and courtesies, and drew her into the house. As they passed the first door that opened into the narrow passage,

Melicent caught a glimpse of the old woman she had seen once before, stooping over a small fire on the hearth where a pot was boiling. She had just taken out a morsel upon a wooden spoon, and was giving it to the sulky poodle that sat by eying her movements. As he swallowed it daintily, the old dame cried in French:

"Now, give me a kiss for thanks, my pretty"; and wiping the dog's mouth with her dingy handkerchief, she kissed it with a hearty smack. Mademoiselle Maline laughed merrily.

"One can see that those two are on good terms," she said, nodding toward the old woman, who looked up and saw them for the first time.

"Make 'em pay well—make 'em pay well, *ma petite!*" she cried, nodding her own head with its dirty cap.

"Never mind, dame; I'll attend to my own affairs," returned the girl, opening a door on the other side of the passage and peeping in.

Melicent had a momentary glimpse of a tall figure stretched on a lounge, with his hands locked under his head, smoking and musing, as it seemed.

"That is right," said the Frenchwoman, with her head inside the door. "Make yourself comfortable until I return. *Place aux dames*, you know."

Melicent had recognized Colonel Archer, and she drew back and turned to her companion.

"You have visitors," she said; "I will come another time."

"By no means. I will take you to a private room. I merely wanted to look in and ask the gentleman to excuse my absence."

"But I prefer to come another day—say to-morrow,

at this hour," persisted Melicent, putting some money into the woman's hand. "No doubt you have many visitors," she continued, as they turned back; "one can hardly find you alone. By the by, is there a young man here named Gabriel Griffin?"

"No," the fortune-teller replied, "there is not."

"Has he visited you at any time to-day?"

"No," mademoiselle answered, with a furtive but keen look at Melicent.

"Will he be here to-day, do you think?"

Mademoiselle shrugged her shoulders.

"God knows!" she said. "How is one to rely on these men? He wanted me to use my art in his behalf, and half promised to return. But no doubt his money has gone to the dram-shop; and what can one do for him without money?"

Melicent hesitated a moment longer, twisting a diamond ring upon the finger of one of her hands that were clasped under the full mantle, and reflecting within herself whether it would be of any use to try to bribe this woman not to lend herself to Colonel Archer's plot. She decided that it would not do to rely upon her. She would take the bribe and make the promise, most likely, but would break her word without scruple. Also, she would probably betray Melicent to her employer; and thus the only hope of aiding Neil would be cut off, for Colonel Archer would not only tell her nothing more, but would keep a strict and suspicious watch upon her movements.

"Did madam wish to see the young man, Gabriel Griffin?" queried the fortune-teller, who had been scrutinizing her visitor as closely as the thick veil would permit.

"No," said Melicent with well-assumed indifference ; "I do not know him. I happened to hear, by accident, that one of his relatives was quite sick, and that he was anxiously looked for at home. You might be kind enough to mention this to him, if you should see him."

Melicent risked this much, feeling sure she was not recognized, and hoping that curiosity might induce Gabriel to go home, where she would by that time have conveyed a note or a message by means of Manch. She still hoped that the boy would come to-day ; perhaps he had arrived during her absence. She hurried away, pursued by the shrill screams of the parrot—agitated and disappointed, but congratulating herself that Colonel Archer had not seen her, and that the fortune-teller's keen black eyes had failed to penetrate the thickness of her veil.

As she reached the gate of her own yard, a cry of "Nice, fresh fish !" struck her ear. She turned quickly and threw up her veil.

It was not Manch, but a boy much taller, with a shallow basket or creel upon his head.

"Buy any fish, madam ?" he said, coming to her side.

"No, I want none to-day," she answered, and was turning off, when the boy asked :

"Be you the mayor's wife ?"

"Yes."

He held out a piece of crumpled paper.

"A chap begged me to give you this here dockyment," he said. "Hope it's nothin' to give offense. I couldn't git round promisin' to bring it to you—he was so anxious-like."

Melicent ran her eyes over the "dockyment."

"How did the boy come to give it to you?"

"Me and my feyther were comin' home in the skiff from fishin' up at the mouth of Snaggy Bayou, when somebody hailed us, and asked us to come to them. We pulled toward him and found this here chap a-sittin' on the bank. He had lamed hisself climbin' for birds' nests or somethin', back in the swamp, and had managed to crawl and hobble out till he come to the river. But he was too much used up to get home; so he lay there restin' until he seed us. I knowed the chap; we calls him Injun amongst us, and he's a handy boy and good fightin' grit. Well, we took him in with us down river and up Black Bayou, and landed him close to his own house. Then my feyther says to me, says he, 'We's all human critters; I'll tote this chap up and put him in his bed and git him a doctor, for his knee's sprained or out of joint.' Which he did; but afore he went the little 'un put this in my hand, and begged me to give it right into yours. He said you'd understand it, which is more'n I did when I took a peep at it. It's a cur'us-lookin' paper to me. He writ it on the linin' of his hat."

"Thank you for bringing it," said Melicent.

"I'd a' brought it this mornin' soon, only marm had a shakin'-ager, and I had to tend the baby till she was foted round a while ago."

"Go around in the back yard to the kitchen. The cook will buy your fish, and I will see you again before you go away."

When she entered the house, Melicent looked again through her tears at the scrap of paper, which exhibited a lot of singular characters, that being interpreted read,

"I fell from a limb at the block-house and hurt my leg. Go to see Ishmael."

Melicent sat down and wrote, or rather printed, the following message, making it plain and concise as possible :

"I am very sorry for your hurt. I will come to see you as soon as I can. Try to see Gabriel to-day. Get H to find him if he does not come home. Warn him not to TELL ANYTHING TO THE FORTUNE-TELLER. It is a PLOT against I"

This note she gave to the fisher-boy, after paying him liberally for his fish, and obtained from him a promise to take it immediately to Manch.

CHAPTER X.

THE ball at the Bradwells' was largely attended. As usual, Melicent's grace and beauty (and her novelty as bride) had drawn a circle of admirers around her. She exerted herself to be agreeable, but her heart was heavy with trouble that had more than one source. In addition to her anxiety for Ishmael, she had the consciousness that her husband's eyes still wore their look of coldness and distrust whenever they turned upon her. Many times, too, the image of Manch, anxious but helpless and suffering, came up before her in contrast to the light and gaiety around her.

She was looking lovely in spite of her paleness, seeming by her dress to personate the wild yellow jasmine, the pride of Southern forests. She wore an amber-col-

ored satin, whose overdress of misty lace was looped with garlands of yellow jasmine, a spray of the buds and bells of the same flower being fastened in the long curls of her hair.

She had danced a quadrille, and was talking to her partner when her glance lighted upon the figure of Colonel Archer, conspicuous by his height even in that crowd of tall Western men. He made his way to her side.

"Is it your policy to hide your light under a bushel to-night, lest it should attract too many fluttering moths around it?" he asked. "I have been looking for you everywhere."

"Then you must have seen me, for I have not been retiring. Perhaps you saw me in the crowd and did not recognize me. I wear my hair differently to-night."

"Yes—in a shower of curls. But that makes no difference; I should know you in any disguise—even that of a hideous loose wrap and double folds of veil," he added significantly.

"What do you mean?" inquired Melicent, in consternation. "He saw and knew me to-day," was her thought.

"I will tell you while we are dancing. Will you give me this waltz?—the music is just beginning."

"You forget—I never waltz."

"Out of deference to your lord and master's commands—I remember."

"Out of regard to my husband's wishes," corrected Melicent.

"Set them aside for this once. I am going presently, and I make my petition for one waltz,"

"You are going so soon?"

"Yes; I have an appointment. I—but I can not talk to you here, with all these listening ears around us," he broke off, bending over her and speaking low. "Will you give me the waltz?"

"I have told you I would not waltz to-night. There are other dances."

"Stupid, insipid affairs! No—the waltz or nothing."

"It must be nothing then," Melicent said, with coldness and irritation in her tones.

He fixed his eyes upon her with a penetrating look, then stooped to pick up the fan she had dropped. As he gave it to her he said:

"When I return you will waltz with me without being twice asked."

He turned off abruptly. Soon afterward Melicent saw him leave the room. His last words added in some vague way to her uneasiness. She was sure they had a hidden significance.

In an hour Colonel Archer reëntered the ballroom. Melicent did not see him when he came in. She was leaning against the framework of an open window, feeling weary and heart-sick. Her husband stood not far off, covertly observing her while he affected to be conversing and watching the movements of some chess-players near him. The tired, sad look on her face extinguished for the moment his feelings of mistrust. His heart was filled with self-reproachful tenderness. He excused himself to the friend who claimed his attention, and was making his way to his wife's side, when he caught sight of Colonel Archer approaching also. He stopped short and remained at a little distance, quietly observant.

“Does the jasmine droop?” said the Colonel, at Melicent’s elbow. “If so, I bring a reviver.”

She turned quickly; a tide of color rushed to her face and then instantly receded. Mr. Avery saw her emotion, but he did not know that it was caused by the expression she saw in Colonel Archer’s eyes. They were absolutely flashing. Triumphant elation shone in them, and behind this glowed a fiercer fire—the look of the bloodhound when he has brought his victim to bay. Melicent knew well what that look meant.

“You have news,” she found courage to say.

He nodded.

“You shall hear it,” he said. “They are playing a waltz again—my favorite. You will not refuse me now?”

She gave him her hand without a word. She would have done so even if she had seen the look her husband cast upon her; for she was consumed by suspense, and she felt that a crisis was at hand. Colonel Archer played with her anxiety tantalizingly, unconscious what cruelty it was.

“What a slender waist!” he exclaimed, as they whirled round to the sweet German music. “It is nothing to clasp. How could you muffle it so this afternoon? Did you think to disguise yourself from me? I knew you when I first peeped at you—standing hesitating at the gate. What was your motive in going there? Tell me honestly now.”

“Curiosity,” uttered Melicent faintly. “I wanted to know the result of your plot.”

“But you learned nothing, and you flitted like a scared bird before I could speak to you. The time was not then

ripe. I told you to wait patiently and I would bring you news of success."

"Do you bring it now?"

"Yes," he cried in low, exulting tones. "He is found—I have succeeded. We have tracked the cowardly wolf to his lair! I shall have revenge for my murdered father at last—at last!"

His eyes shone down into hers with a fierce splendor; his face was aglow with the blended passions of hate and triumph. Melicent could not speak; her look told him to go on.

"He is found. He is here, as I suspected. He is a fisherman. He lives in a hut on Black Bayou and goes by the name of—Ishmael."

The room swam round to Melicent—the lights, the music, the voices were a dull confusion. She still whirled in the waltz by sheer momentum and the strength of her partner's arm; but her feet hardly touched the floor; her head leaned heavily on her partner's shoulder.

"You are dizzy," he said; "we have waltzed too fast. We will sit down and rest."

He placed her in a seat, and, noting her white cheeks, said, "I will get you a glass of water."

"Stop one moment," she managed to say. "You did not tell me—shall you arrest him to-night?"

"Yes, in two or three hours from now. I have the warrant for his arrest in my pocket. I should have gone after him at once, but I wanted to look in here again—to tell you, and—to have my way about the waltz. He is safe enough; he is not suspecting—thinks himself all right. Just now, indeed, he is doubly safe—he is sick."

"Sick?"

"Oh! he shall be well cared for; he shan't have a chance to die in his bed and cheat the gallows a second time."

Melicent shuddered inwardly, but she calmed herself by an effort of will. While Colonel Archer was gone for the water, she formed a rapid and desperate resolution. When he returned, she took the glass from his hand, and said with a smile and a bend of the head:

"I drink to your success. May you prosper in love as you have done in revenge! If you are as indefatigable in the pursuit of the one as you have been of the other, there is no maiden's heart that will resist your siege."

"I lay siege to but one heart," he said, "and that is too strongly barricaded and too jealously guarded for me to hope that it will soon capitulate. But, *nil desperandum*."

"*A propos* of hearts and maidens," said Melicent gayly, "I have one request to make. I have risked my husband's displeasure by waltzing—all because of you. You owe me some return. Well, do you see that young lady in blue sitting yonder partnerless—a forlorn but lovely wall-flower? She is one of the three who came here to-night under my chaperonage. I should like her to enjoy her first ball, and I know how agreeable you can be when you please. I want you to dance with her the set that is about to form."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is such a bore to dance a quadrille—and with a young miss, too! She is sure to be either hoydenish or sentimental, pert or bashful; in either case, intolerable."

"No, I assure you she is quite natural and charming.

Here, come with me; let me give her the pleasure of your acquaintance—for my sake, remember.”

“For your sake I would give her my head.”

“Oh! I shall not ask such a sacrifice in her behalf. Only your hand in the next dance—your heart, perhaps, as a willing after-gift.”

And, going across the room with Colonel Archer, she presented him to Miss Stanley and left them.

“Pray Heaven the set may be a long one!” she thought as she at once sought out her husband. He was talking to a group of gentlemen as she came up. She laid her hand on his arm and drew him a little aside.

“Aleck,” she said, lifting her pleading eyes to his stern face, “I am tired of the ball, and I feel really ill.”

“You seemed so just now, madam,” he said, with bitter emphasis.

“You say that because I waltzed with Colonel Archer. It was against my inclination. It was in a manner forced upon me by—circumstances. But you do not understand—you will not believe me. Let that pass; I am unwell—I wish to go home.”

He looked at her white face and haggard eyes with wonder. And he had seen her laughing so gayly a moment ago! But there was no mistaking the expression of pain about her mouth, the look of wildness in her eyes. His face relaxed from its mould of cold irony.

“You want me to go with you?” he said.

“No; I do not wish to take the Stanley girls away. They are dancing and enjoying themselves; and I would not like them to feel slighted, as they would do if we both went away. I wish you to stay to excuse my going home, and to bring them when they are ready to leave.

You need only accompany me to the carriage. I will send it back. The dance is beginning—I can slip off almost unnoticed.”

He gave her his arm without another word, and she passed through the rooms, smiling and bowing her adieux and acknowledgment of the concern elicited by her pale face and evident indisposition. Mr. Avery handed her into the carriage and left her with a simple good night, going around afterward to the man on the box and enjoining him to drive carefully, as Mrs. Avery was not well.

She was left alone, to her inexpressible relief—left to throw herself back upon the seat—to crush her hands together and nerve herself for what she intended to do.

“Drive faster,” she said to the coachman.

He obeyed. In a few moments she was at home. She sent back the carriage, unlocked the hall-door, and entered noiselessly. There was no sound in response. The servants were asleep or amusing themselves in the kitchen, situated in the back part of the yard. She ran up swiftly to her room, put on a riding-habit over her ball-dress, and, going to the library, took a key from her husband’s desk, and went out again—out to the stable-yard. With the key she unfastened the stable-door and entered, lighted only by the moonlight. She went up to her own horse—the beautiful half-bred Arabian she had brought from home—and patted his arched neck.

“You and I part for ever to-night,” she said. “Do your best for me, Monsoon, my brave horse. Human life will hang on your speed to-night.”

There were several bridles and men’s saddles hanging against the walls. She took down the plainest of these

and put them on her horse with hands that had not forgotten their early skill. She was a perfect horsewoman. Often when she was Milly Brown she had ridden half-tamed mustangs barebacked; so she had no hesitation now in springing into the man's saddle she had girted securely upon her favorite. She rode slowly out of the stable-yard—slowly out of the street, but increased her speed as she entered the more suburban portion of the town, for the houses were dark and there were no passers in the streets. When she reached the outskirts of the town, she tightened rein and urged her horse into a gallop. Swiftly she sped along the road that ran parallel to Black Bayou. The moon shone wanly out; the long, black shadows lay across her path. She had wild memories of that other terrible night, when she had ridden vainly to the rescue of Neil Griffin so long ago. She seemed again to hear that struggling cry of mortal agony, to see that swinging form in the red-torch glare, to behold the ring of cruel faces that encircled the "Gallows Tree." Would she be again too late? She glanced up at the stars. "If Colonel Archer did not deceive me, I shall be in time," she thought. "He said in two or three hours, and it has not yet been an hour, I think."

She turned out into the dim path that led down to the bayou. She forded the stream and approached the cabin of Ishmael. What sound was that which came from behind the wall of long moss and live-oak boughs? The plaintive notes of a violin touched softly as an accompaniment to the song she had heard Ishmael whistling while he fed his birds—the mournful little love-ballad whose words Colonel Archer had recalled to her mind. She checked her horse a moment to listen:

“My love has friends and fortune,
The rich attend her door;
My love has gold and silver,
While I, alas! am poor.
The ribbon fair that bound her hair
Was all she left to me,
While here I lie alone to die
Beneath the willow-tree.”

The words seemed to Melicent to have a touching significance. Tears for the first time rushed to her eyes. She dashed them off, sprang from her horse, and stood within the doorway of the dimly lighted hut. Her hat had fallen off, her loose hair flowed around her; all artificial disguise of dress and expression was banished from her at this moment. She had not counted upon the effect her presence would have upon Ishmael. He sat on the edge of his pallet, his hand lying listlessly across his violin, his eyes darker and larger since his illness, looking wistfully forward.

“Ishmael.”

He turned around; he stared at her mutely, wildly; he rose to his feet and tottered forward.

“Milly! Milly! My God, it is my darling’s spirit!” he cried, extending his arms.

Melicent sprang to him and caught him in her own grasp, strengthened preternaturally by excitement.

“Hush!” she uttered; “be calm. I am Mrs. Avery. Your enemies are upon you. They will be here in a few moments. You must fly instantly; there is not a moment to be lost! I have brought you a horse; are you strong enough to ride?”

“It is no use!” he cried, falling back against the wall,

and looking hopelessly forward. "It had to come. It is God's hand. I am tired of the struggle."

"It is of use to try to save yourself. You can do it. Courage, courage! Come at once—for Manch's sake, for my sake!"

He was looking at her wildly, yearningly, seeming to lose sight of his danger in one thought.

"Oh, my God! how like she is to Milly!" he muttered.

Melicent had found him his coat.

"Put it on," she said. "Is your purse in it? Yes. See, I put this loaf of bread into the other pocket. You will not have time to stop for food. Ah! you have on your shoes—that is well. Here is your hat. Now come, Ishmael; come at once! Lean upon me."

She threw her arm about him. She overcame his weakness, his despondency, by her own strength and courage. She drew him out to where the horse was standing. She held the bridle while he mounted.

"Good-by," she whispered; "good-by, Ishmael. God be with you!"

He gave her hand a convulsive and trembling pressure.

"You have befriended me as no other human being ever did. God bless you for it, lady! The thanks of a poor creature like me are a small return."

He galloped away through the shadows. Melicent fell upon her knees, silently praying as she listened to the sound of the retreating hoof-strokes. As it died away, a thought of herself for the first time came into her mind. She must return at once. It would be broad day before she could reach home. How should she account for her

absence? How should she meet her husband's indignant anger, his scornful suspicion? She had seen that his distrust was culminating. Now she felt there would be an open outburst—a public shame. Her little social world, where she had trod as a queen, seemed tottering under her. Her home world of love and peace and confidence had already been hopelessly darkened by the shadow of secrecy and suspicion.

She was thinking these bitter thoughts—still kneeling with her face buried in her hands. Suddenly she lifted her head. The tramp of a horse was again audible. She listened intently. The sound grew more distinct—came nearer and nearer still. What could it mean? Was Ishmael returning? “What can he have left behind that is so important as his own safety?” she thought.

The dark, moss-hung branches parted; a man rode into the dimly-lighted space, leading a horse bridled and saddled. One glance sufficed: the man was Colonel Archer, and the horse was Monsoon!

CHAPTER XI.

COLONEL ARCHER dismounted and stood before her.

“Mrs. Avery, I have brought back your horse,” he said.

“But where is he? Where is Ishmael?” she cried.

“If you mean Neil Griffin, the murderer, he has been arrested; he is on his way to prison.”

“Too late! O God! I was too late again!” moaned Melicent.

“‘Too late *again*.’ Mrs. Avery, what do you mean? What is this man to you?”

She made no reply. She did not seem to hear him. She stood wringing her hands together and looking despairingly out into the darkness. The light from Ishmael’s lamp streamed through the window and fell across her white, anguished face. He looked at her intently, wonderingly, a moment; then he repeated his question:

“What was this man to you?”

She turned her eyes upon him.

“You deceived me. You said he would not be arrested in three or four hours.”

“Afterward I thought best to hurry matters. The sequel shows I was correct. We were just in time to intercept him. You had nearly forestalled us. And *you* talk of deception—*you*, who have played me false all the time! And I never guessed your double-dealing—never had a real suspicion of your treachery, until it was suggested to me to-night by a woman. It takes the sex to understand each other. So I took to heart Mademoiselle Maline’s hint of your interest in Griffin, and watched you closely when I made my communication. I saw your emotion; I understood the manœuvre about the dance with your young lady charge. She had her dance, since I had promised you, but it had nearly cost me my revenge—or rather, it had nearly caused its postponement. We had to ride in hot haste, and it was a lucky chance that we were in time to see Monsoon dash into the road a hundred yards ahead of us.”

“Ah! if I had made more haste!”

“That would have availed nothing; only made a delay—given us a chase for our fox. Do you think I

would have suffered him to escape? But it was not your fault that he was caught; you did your best to frustrate me. You have risked to-night—more than I care to name. I never suspected you of so much courage or—so much duplicity.”

“Think of me as you please,” answered Melicent gloomily. “It is humiliating, but it is nothing to what *he* has to bear.”

She was hardly conscious that she spoke aloud. She did not reflect upon what Colonel Archer might think, or what suspicions of her might be excited in his mind. Thought of herself was of small account at this moment.

“You could not speak with more feeling if this man were your *lover*,” Colonel Archer said, with irritated significance in his tones, but drawing nearer to her as he spoke.

She started from her listless gloom as if she had heard the hiss of a serpent. She drew back a step, and lifting her head, stood before him—transformed in an instant into an image of proud dignity. Her eyes flashed one withering look upon him; then she turned calmly away.

“I might have known that such as he would put an evil construction upon what I have done to-night,” she said, with a sad scorn in her voice.

“And what other construction, in the name of Heaven, could you expect, Mrs. Avery?”

“One befitting a being with a *soul* as well as sense; a reference to compassion, sympathy, duty—a belief in some mystery that might have misfortune in it, but not guilt. But no—I am at fault. I expected nothing of the kind; I expect nothing of you, Colonel Archer. Our paths, that have met casually, separate now for ever. I

am going; I wish you good night.—Here, Monsoon—come here.”

The horse turned at her call and came to her, where she stood on the low step at the cabin-door.

“Stay!” cried Colonel Archer impetuously, his better instincts rising dominant. “Listen to me, I entreat you. I do not doubt you; no sane man can that looks into your face. I believe in you, in spite of circumstances. I will not seek to pry into your motives or your feelings; I will respect them. No act of mine shall again add to your distress or annoyance. Forgive me. Think of me as a friend. I can not bear that you should think of me only as a revengeful and a sensual man. Will you not look upon me as a friend?”

She stooped to gather the reins more closely in her little, white-gloved hands.

“The time is passing,” she said. “We return by different roads; I shall take the foot-path on this side the bayou.”

She bent her head, stately as ever; she touched her horse, that, springing forward, disappeared behind the moss-hung trees.

“She would not accept my offered friendship,” muttered Colonel Archer. “Well, it is hers all the same. One can afford to be loyal to such a woman—proud and gentle as though princess-born! What a fool I was to think she could be easily won! But such a woman’s love would be worth having. I wonder if it is possible she can love that pale, wild-eyed wretch we nabbed just now! Be it love or pity, or whatever else, that was the motive, she has shown herself devoted to him to-night. I’ll be hanged if it wasn’t heroic, all things considered; for

scandal is worse to a woman than a two-edged sword, and she has braved that and Avery's anger to boot. If they find out about this midnight adventure, the wolves of gossip will be upon her, sure. It's odds if Avery interposes. He's more apt to side with them and cast her off in a fit of jealous madness. He ought to be shot if he does, and I'd like to call him out myself unless, indeed—but no, I'd stake my life on her honor. I've let my vanity blind me into construing things my own way; but I saw to the bottom of her soul in that look she gave me to-night. There's some deuced mystery that I can't see into; but, come what may, I'll stand her friend, whether she wills it or not. I'll serve her any way I can, except setting free that villain I have in my clutch at last. I wouldn't forego giving him his dues—not if my father's ghost should beg it!”

While these thoughts ran through his mind, Colonel Archer entered the cabin of Neil Griffin and surveyed its scanty contents. The mocking-bird, awakened by the music and light, burst out into a wild carol; the squirrel, coiled up in his box, peeped out of his bed of moss; the violin lay beside the straw pallet; a rough crucifix hung over the window, and beneath it bloomed a box of sweet violets.

“Singular furniture for a murderer's den,” commented Colonel Archer, as he closed the door, which had not even a lock, and, mounting his horse, rode rapidly away.

CHAPTER XII.

THE night was nearly spent, the moon was paling in the sky, as Melicent rode back along the deserted streets. The ball was not yet over; the sound of the merry dance-music reached her ear from afar. How strangely it sounded!—how strongly it contrasted with the solemn silence of the woods she had just left—with the mournful cadence of Ishmael's song, that still rung in her ears! The sounds of merriment increased yet more the confusion in Melicent's brain. The night's adventure—was it not a terrible dream? The brief, wild interview with Neil—his looks, his tones, when he staggered to her with outstretched arms, calling her by that name long dead—his flight, his arrest—were they not all a dizzy vision, caused by that whirling waltz, whose music seemed to be playing still—that waltz with Colonel Archer, when her husband had watched her with stern eyes, and her partner, bending down, had whispered in her ear:

“Eureka! the murderer is found!”

She was partially roused from this trance-like state by the stopping of her horse. He had entered the stable-yard, and stood before the door of his stall. Mechanically Melicent dismounted and stood beside him. Her brain still reeled and wild images floated indistinctly before her. She leaned her arms upon Monsoon's neck, and, bending her head down upon them, tried to arouse and collect her numbed faculties. She started as a hand grasped her arm. She looked around with a faint cry, and saw her husband.

"Give the horse to me," he demanded, taking the bridle from her hand.

She did not heed his hoarse, stern tones. She flung herself on his breast; the tension of her overstrained nerves gave way, and she clasped him convulsively, while her frame shook with tearless sobs. He lifted his arms as if to clasp her, then dropped them quickly to his side.

"Go to the house!" he commanded. He unloosed her clinging arms and put her back from him sternly. "Go to your room at once, and make as little noise as you can—for your own sake!"

She sighed deeply and turned away. She entered the house and found the lamp in the hall burning, but no one there. As she passed along the corridor she could hear the voices and laughter of the Stanley girls. They had but just returned from the ball, and were chatting over the events of the night as they undressed.

"Hush!" she heard one of them say as she passed their door. "You will disturb poor Mrs. Avery."

She felt like a guilty wretch as she stole to her room, and, taking the key from her pocket, unlocked the door, entered, and undressed before any one came in. Presently Flora rapped softly at the door, turned the handle, and peeped in.

"You up, Miss Melicent?" she said, coming in. "Is your head any better? You look dreadful pale. Mr. Avery wouldn't let me knock at your door before for fear of 'sturbin' you. He said you had come home sick. Why didn't you call me and let me help you undress?"

To Melicent's eye there seemed to be a suspicious keenness in the look with which the girl regarded her. She answered coldly:

"I did not need you—nor do I now. There is nothing I want but quiet. You can go to bed."

When the girl had gone, she threw on a dressing-gown and waited for her husband to come up stairs—waited, while moments passed and the noises all died into silence, and the house was so still that she could hear the fierce beating of her own heart. At last she heard his step in the passage outside. He was going on to another room, when she opened the door and called to him. He stopped, hesitated, and finally came in. He stood before her, with his hand upon the door, partially closing it behind him.

"What is it you want with me, madam?"

"Only that you should not think evil of me, Aleck."

"Think evil of you?" he repeated, throwing back his head and laughing in bitterest scorn. "Surely not. Would I think evil of a snake that should crawl to my fireside, warm itself at my hearth, and sting me? Would I think evil of it, or would I merely crush it and fling it from me with loathing?"

He threw off the hand she had laid upon his, stepped back, and folded his arms on his breast.

"Very well," said his wife, growing ashen pale as her hand dropped at her side. "Yet I must still appeal to you, Aleck. I can bear anything better than your contempt. Believe in my truth, if it is hard to do so. I am unfortunate, but not guilty. If you knew all, you might not love me any more, but I should have your sympathy, your respect. That would be much—that would help me to bear up under my hard fate; but to have you think evil of me—to have you think of me as so base, so unworthy—that—oh! that is bitter!"

He looked at her, standing before him in her white dressing-gown—so pale, so sorrowful, but so earnest, so candid in look and voice.

“Believe you! trust in you!” he cried. “Do you think me an idiot? You talk of trust and belief, and you offer no explanation of your unaccountable conduct to-night! Will you tell me your object in putting forth a pretense of illness, that you might go home alone—that you might ride off at midnight and be away for hours—no one knows where? Will you tell me why and where you went, and your reason for covering up your intention with secrecy and falsehood?”

She was silent a moment. Her promise to her father, in answer to his solemn injunction that she should never betray the secret of her life—the creeping fear she had begun to entertain that her father’s welfare was somehow darkly bound up with this secret—made her hesitate. She could not speak until she had heard from her father. The old habit of blind obedience to him, of reverence for him, asserted itself even in view of the alternative of sorrow and shame.

“I can not tell you, Aleck—not now. Bear with me a few days, and it may be I shall be permitted to explain all.”

“Miserable subterfuge!” he cried. “Madam, your hypocrisy sinks you even lower than your unfaithfulness. I put no faith in a mystery that a wife can not explain to her husband. I will not listen to such trifling. Do not dare to speak to me again of your innocence.”

“I will, I must speak to you of it, Aleck!” she cried, coming swiftly to his side and casting herself on her knees before him. “I will swear it by the God above us!

I can not lose your esteem; it is the only consolation I can have. A strange, a cruel fate has overtaken me. I am obliged by circumstances to keep it secret from you for the present. It will deprive me of your love, your protection, but let it spare me your sympathy and respect. Leave me that stay in the midst of my trials. Believe that I am not guilty—that I am not untrue.”

He looked at her as she knelt before him, with up-raised eyes full of anguish, but clear and steadfast. His features were convulsed by the strong struggle within him between tenderness and suspicion. His mouth relaxed from its sternness and trembled as he tried to speak.

“Melicent,” he said huskily, “rise. Do not kneel at my feet in that way.”

He put out his hand as if to raise her, and touched the soft hair that fell in loose masses about her. He drew back quickly, as if he feared to touch her, lest it should melt his sternness. He made an effort to regain his self-control.

“Since you have had recourse to oaths,” he said, “take one that I will accept as a test of your truth. Swear to me that you have not seen or spoken to Colonel Archer since you left the ballroom to-night—that you have had no private interview with him since you rode away from here at midnight.”

She did not speak; she remembered that she could not do so in a way to command his belief, unless she could explain everything; then, feeling how her silence must be construed, she grew confused—a shadow of distress passed over her face. It looked to his eyes like guilt. His features took their set, stony expression once more.

"Enough!" he cried. "Do not perjure yourself. Do not speak again."

He turned from her and flung open the door. On its threshold he paused and fixed his eyes upon her; a look of keen pain came into them and mingled with their fierce indignation.

"Melicent Avery," he said, in the deep, low utterance of concentrated feeling, "I have loved you as dearly as ever man loved woman; I trusted you wholly. You have deceived me—you have ruined me. You have turned my love into torture. You have dashed my ambitious hopes to the ground. You may make me a murderer and an outcast. God forgive you—you have ruined me!"

He closed the door and left her to the anguish of her own reflections. She remained kneeling where he left her, overwhelmed by the tide of bitter and bewildering feelings. In the chaos of her mind one thought took definite shape.

"I must go away. I have no right to stay here, to spoil a good man's life, to soil his name, to blight his prospects, to torture his heart—it may be, as he said, to make him a murderer and an outcast. I must go away. I must take my evil fortunes away from this house; I have no right to bring a shadow upon it. I am not his wife. Oh! if I were permitted to tell him this—to say to him: 'I am nothing to you. I have not disgraced your name, for it does not belong to me. I am only a cheat—an impostor. Let me go away, and the reproach of my name will drop from you and your honorable house, and you will be once more free and happy!'"

Then, as if in contrast with the words "free and

happy," came up the thought of Neil—Neil in prison, sick and desolate. What now could be done to help him? She thought of her father. Might he not be able to save Neil, if he would? He was so strong of will, so powerful in his influence over others; and then he could testify many things in Neil's favor. If only he could be induced to acknowledge the relationship between them—to divulge that secret which was so fatal to her peace of mind.

She rose from her knees, tossed back the blinding waves of her hair, and bathed her burning forehead. When she had grown calmer, she sat down and wrote her father all that had happened—all that she had done; disclosed to him, for the first time, the fact that Neil Griffin still lived; that he was in prison, about to be prosecuted by the son of the murdered miner; that, in consequence of her efforts to warn him, she had excited the distrust of Mr. Avery. She implored her father to help Neil Griffin, by means of money, or through his influence, or by enlisting in the case the services of talented lawyers that were his friends. She entreated him, also, to release her from her promise not to disclose to Mr. Avery the circumstance of her previous marriage.

"If I could tell him all," she wrote, "I might still hope to retain his esteem. In the general wreck of my life, I might have this one comfort to cling to. As it is, I have lost all. Write, then, at once, or send me one word by telegraph saying that I may or may not reveal the secret that weighs upon me like guilt."

She sealed and addressed the letter in the same swift, eager manner in which she had written it. The day was now shining into her chamber—upon her wan lamp and

haggard face. She rang a summons for her maid, who appeared after some delay, yawning and rubbing her eyes. Melicent gave the letter into her hands and directed her to take it to the office at once, that it might be sent off in the morning's mail.

When the girl was gone, Melicent threw herself upon the bed and buried her face in the cool pillows. But sleep would not visit her burning eyes. A maze of many images swam before her. She seemed whirling still in the dizziest of waltzes—whirling to the maddest music—round and round, as it seemed, on the verge of a frightful precipice—round and round in her partner's grasp; and suddenly the ground fails beneath her feet—a gulf yawns beneath her. She is falling, falling; no, she sways—swings over the abyss—round and round still; and raising her eyes to pray for mercy, she sees that it is a rope from which she swings—a rope knotted around the neck of the man who hangs and strangles as he holds her in a dying clutch. And his face! she sees it as she saw it once before—livid, contorted with death-struggles—the face of Neil Griffin! As she stares at it in numb horror, she sees the rope severed above his head. She feels herself falling—falling through awful space—nearing that gulf below, where black waters roll and hissing serpents lift up their crested heads—nearing it; but, as they touch the seething flood, the hand of Unconsciousness wipes the vision from her brain—she knows no more.

When Flora went to wake her mistress, hours after, she found her lying with scarlet cheeks and half-closed eyes, in the heavy stupor of fever.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN Melicent recovered consciousness, she found herself in bed with the room darkened and quiet, except for a murmur of voices in the subdued tone that tells of cautiousness. A confused feeling about the head, a heaviness of the limbs came with the first return of sense.

"I have been ill," she thought; and the next moment the recollection of the trying scenes through which she had lately passed broke upon her. She closed her eyes and lay still, endeavoring to collect energy to take up the burden of life again.

As she lay thus, the murmuring voices reached her ear distinctly. She recognized the accents of the Hon. Mrs. Bradwell speaking in the condescending tones she used in addressing an inferior.

"So you say that the mayor does not even know she is sick—went off that morning without seeing her at all. Well, I must say that is queer; and it is much to be regretted, for it will confirm all the dreadful tales that are afloat."

"I had it from her own maid, ma'am," said the snuffy voice of Mrs. Simpson, a clergyman's widow in reduced circumstances, who went out as nurse "in the first families only." "The girl ran in to tell her mistress about the fight between Mr. Avery and that Colonel, and she found Mrs. Avery lying on the floor in a faint."

"What caused her to faint? It must be she had heard about the fight."

"The girl said there hadn't a soul been to her bed-

chamber. Mr. Avery came into the house looking like a thunder-cloud, and ran up to his room and down again in a minute with a pair of saddle-bags upon his arm. He mounted his horse and rode off, and the stable-man said he was going on a 'lectioneering trip in the country with two of his friends. The man told the girl about the difficulty, and said Mr. Avery shot the Colonel—what's his-name—in a quarrel about politics."

"I say politics!" smiled the honorable lady, shrugging her fat shoulders.

"You think that wasn't what it was about?" queried the other, craning her bony neck toward her *vis-à-vis*, and taking the snuff-brush out of her ugly mouth for a fresh "dip" into the black bottle she held.

"Oh! *I* don't pretend to know. I'm down on scandal, Mrs. Simpson, as you're aware. It's something I never deal in—never. But people are not all like me, and they *will* talk, Mrs. Simpson, they *will*; and one can't stop their mouths nor one's own ears, can they?"

"Of course not," responded the clergyman's widow, with a pious sigh. "So they say it wasn't politics as them two quarreled about?"

"That's the talk, you know. They say the political difference was only a blind—a make-belief to save a certain person's name, and that there were other grounds—"

"What do they say they were?"

"Oh! don't ask me. They're too dreadful—the tales that are ringing everywhere about that poor woman there—about her doings that night of the ball—her pretending to be sick and coming home, leaving her husband and the Stanley girls behind, and then mounting her horse and riding off into the woods and God knows where—"

only coming back at daybreak. That's not half they say; indeed, it's too dreadful to repeat!"

"My gracious!" ejaculated the relict, raising her bony hands and speaking in a tone of intense satisfaction. "Why, the poor thing's ruined herself—and so proud and high-headed as she was!"

"Well, her pride will have a fall. She has ruined her husband too. The General thinks the affair with Colonel Archer has lost Avery his election. Everybody knows he provoked the quarrel. The witnesses say he was so insulting the Colonel had to retort, and then Avery called on him to arm himself, jerked out his revolver, and fired at Archer's heart. What saved him was an opera-glass he had in his breast-pocket. That turned the shot, and it went into his right arm. The Colonel fired in the air, and was very quiet and calm all the time. Avery was very violent. The General thinks he has injured his popularity, and that he'd better staid and cleared up things to his constituents here, instead of going off into the country as soon as he had given himself up and been released on bond."

"It's a monstrous pity! Such a fine, rising young man as the mayor was always called."

"Yes; a rising, money-making man—if he'd only married *here*, where he made his money, instead of going off after a strange woman. I'm not speaking for my own daughter at all. It's a blessing now that *that* never took place. But there are other girls around here if Arabella couldn't love him. I say—I mean people will say—this is a judgment on him for not marrying in his own State, like that Goliath in the Bible that took the strange wo-

man Delilah, and she cut his head off—which the mayor had better take warning by.”

“Yes, yes,” assented the widow, whose knowledge of the Bible enabled her to know that it was Samson and not Goliath who had gone after the strange woman, and it was his hair and not his head that Delilah had cut off. But she would almost have suffered her own head to be cut off before she would have contradicted this rich lady.

The Hon. Mrs. Bradwell looked at her heavy gold watch and rose slowly, shaking out the folds of her black silk.

“She sleeps a long time,” she said, glancing at the bed where Melicent lay with closed eyes. “The doctor said she had been asleep an hour when I came. He says the fever has nearly cooled off, and she will wake in her right mind. I thought I’d stay awhile and see how she would be and how she’d take it. It’ll have to be broke to her, you know.”

“Yes, it’ll have to be broke to her. Hadn’t you better break it to her yourself, Mrs. Bradwell? She’ll feel it more, coming from a lady of your high standing.”

“Well, I can do it, I suppose,” replied the pompous matron resignedly. “I’m used to having such delicate matters put upon me. I’ll call in as I come back; she will be awake by that time.”

When the door had closed behind the scandal-hating dame, Melicent turned her head, opened her large eyes, and looked fixedly into the hungry, hawk-like visage of the parson’s relict.

“Why—so you are awake! How do you feel, my poor dear? Better, I can see—thanks to a merciful Provi-

dence," said the fawning Simpson, coming up to the bed and stretching out her claw-like hand.

Melicent put her aside with a little quietly repellent gesture.

"How long have I been ill?" she asked.

"Oh! not long; a little touch of the fever—that's all."

"I have been delirious, and I want to know how long!" demanded Melicent with decision.

"Three days," replied the woman, taken aback by her manner.

"Has anything come for me during that time—any letters or other communications?"

Mrs. Simpson hesitated, but said at last there were two letters and a sealed telegram that came this morning.

"Bring me the telegram, if you please."

"Really, now, my dear Mrs. Avery, the doctor said—"

"Never mind now what the doctor said; you can tell me that some other time. Bring me the telegram at once."

There was no disobeying the imperious command of voice and eye. The woman brought the envelope and put it into Melicent's hand. She tore it open with trembling haste. There were but two lines in answer to her letter, but they were full of import to Melicent.

"No; not one word, as you value more than life! Remember your promise. Come to me at once."

Melicent dropped the slip of paper from her hand. She had lost her last hope of being able to exculpate her-

self in the eyes of the man she loved. If she could not reveal everything to him, she could not explain the reason of her strange conduct. And she could reveal nothing in the face of her father's solemn protest and her own promise. Again there went through her with a pang of conviction the feeling that there must be some more powerful motive than was immediately apparent for her father's determination to conceal the secret of their changed identities at all hazards. Was it possible there could be any stain of shame or crime upon that earlier life of his prior to that mysterious advent at Bear's Bend—a stain which he feared the revelation of his changed name might cause to be traced and brought to light? But in spite of the shadow that had lately fallen upon her estimate of her father, she found it impossible to connect any idea of crime with him—the noble-browed, stately old man, with his stern eye and voice that could soften so tenderly for her. Yes, she would go to him at once—as soon as she could leave her bed; she resolved upon that. She could not stay here—here where her presence brought only pain and disgrace. She had no right to stay an hour longer. She had driven Mr. Avery from his home; she had injured, perhaps ruined his prospects; she could do Neil no good by staying, and perhaps her father might help him if she could see him and persuade him to do so.

Yes, she would go to her father. She would struggle with this bodily weakness and this bitterer heart-pain, and overcome them. She called for food. When it was brought, she ate with an eagerness born of her determination to get well. As she finished, Flora took the plate, saying:

"That soup's nice, I know. It's bird soup, Miss Melicent—de plumpest little partridges; and who does you think brought' em? Why, dat little bushy-headed fisherman's boy you bought de rocks and glass things from. And he wouldn't take a cent of pay. He's been here several times 'quirin' after you. He's crippled hisself somehow and walks on a crutch. He looks bad, I tell you. I thought he mout be hungry and give him some vittles, but he wouldn't eat a moufful. He looks mighty downhearted, and he wanted to see you anyhow, but I told him that wouldn't begin to do; the doctor done said you had information in your head."

"If he comes again, Flora, bring him up to see me—do you hear?"

"Yes, Miss Melicent; but—but I doesn't know what a lady like you can want to see the likes of *him* for."

"That concerns only me," said Melicent. "You have simply to do what I have told you."

At this moment the doctor was announced, and, coming in, was greatly surprised to see how suddenly the disease had quit its hold, and what a rapid improvement a few hours had wrought in his patient.

"All you need now is to take care of yourself and keep quiet."

"And see no company, doctor; lay that down as a stringent injunction, please."

He looked at her quickly. He thought he understood her motive. He knew what keen torture it was in the power of women to inflict.

"Very well," he said, smiling. "That is best if you can really keep the women away."

Hardly had he gone before the Hon. Mrs. Bradwell called in upon her mission to heap coals of fire on Melicent's conscience and see how she bore it, that she might form her opinion of her guilt or innocence accordingly; a mode of trial that would remind one of the old-time test of witchcraft—namely, to throw the suspected witch into the water, when, if she drowned, she was innocent; if she floated, she was a witch and must be burned.

Melicent declined to see her visitor.

“Dr. McPhail has just forbidden me to see company,” she said to Mrs. Simpson.

“She says she saw the doctor, and he told her to go on; and besides, she has something to communicate to you. Things has happened that ought to be broke to you, my poor dear, and Mrs. Bradwell thought—”

“I want no one to break anything to me. I know all that has occurred since I was taken sick. I do not wish to be spoken to about it. I will not see Mrs. Bradwell or any one else, except one person that I have told the servant about.”

And so Mrs. Avery balked the curiosity of her former “dear friends”; and, in revenge, they fell upon her reputation and attacked it with so much vigor and such fertility of invention as soon to reduce it to tatters. Those who had been in raptures over “that sweet creature, the mayor's wife,” were first to declare they had always seen there was something wrong about her, and that the sweet, stately way some folks raved about had always struck them as boldness.

That afternoon, while Mrs. Simpson, with her prayer-book held piously before her, was regaling herself on a pickle and a ham sandwich she had stowed away at din-

ner in the pocket of her rusty bombazine dress, the cook's rosy, good-humored face was thrust in at the door, and her voice was heard exclaiming:

"Well, thin! here's that mite of a boy again, and nothing will do him at all, at all, but I must bring this trumpery bit of a nosegay up to the madam."

As she spoke, she flourished a little bunch of wild flowers mixed with wood mosses and scented by a spray of yellow jasmine. Flora caught it and jerked it around in her fingers with great contempt.

"A pretty thing to send to a lady dat has gardens of fine flowers, let alone de grand bouquets in de vases down stairs her friends done sent her!"

"Give them to me," said Melicent, her eye lighting with pleasure.—"And go down directly, Flora, and bring the child to me. Mrs. Simpson will go down stairs with you. I want to see the boy alone.—Wouldn't you like a glass of wine and some sweet biscuits in the dining-room, Mrs. Simpson?"

The individual addressed swallowed the last of the ham sandwich as she rose, smirking her thanks; but Melicent saw the gleam of cunning malice in her small gray eye, and she felt sure that the relict of Parson Simpson would take an early opportunity of relieving her mind to the Hon. Mrs. Bradwell respecting the fact of Mrs. Avery's refusing to see respectable ladies, while she held private interviews with low fisher-boys who brought her flowers and secret messages.

Melicent felt sure of this, and smiled to herself the bitter smile of one in whom the sense of wrong begets a spirit of defiance. The hard look softened as the tap of Manch's crutch sounded in the passage outside. When

the door opened and closed behind him, she stretched out her hand to him, exclaiming:

"How glad I am to see you, Manch! Come to me."

She drew him close to her and passed her fingers tenderly over his forehead and through his curly hair.

"My poor boy," she said, "how thin you are! You have suffered. I am very sorry."

"It don't matter much about me," he replied. "I'll soon be all right; but—"

His lip quivered and he looked down. Melicent knew he was thinking of Ishmael.

"Have you seen him?" she asked.

He nodded assent.

"I saw him this mornin'. You see I'd gone there twice before, but they wouldn't let me in. So I struck a bargain with the jailer, and I done yard jobs for him, and got him to let me in for my pay."

"He was glad to see you, I am sure."

"He was glad and sorry both. He put his hands on my shoulders in his kind, cheerful way; but I see him change color and his eyes drop, and I knowed that he was hurt for me to see him there, in that place where they puts rogues and blackguards and throat-cutters—him that's tender-hearted and gentle as a girl-child. It went through me like a knife to see him sitting there so patient and sorrowful, like a dumb cre'tur' that knows it's innocent, but can't help your mistreatin' it. I wanted to be as big as the giant in my book, jest to knock the heads offen all the powerful chaps that does wrong and cruel things to the poor and weak."

"It is dreadful for him to be there," said Melicent.

"It is a miserable place. If we could make him more comfortable!"

"It's not that; he's used to poor fare and a hard pallet. It's the shame of bein' there, you know, and the horror of dyin' in that way—swung up for all the town to stare at. I know he's bound to think of that, though he won't let on so, and says it don't matter how we go out of the world; we are soon forgot, and the dirt lies as light on the poor man's box as on the great one's fine coffin. But I'm forgettin' what he charged me to say. He told me to thank you in his name for all the pains and the risk you took to save him. He said he was 'fraid it got you into trouble, and begged me to find out from you, and see if there was anything he could say to—to—anybody that might be of use to you."

"No, there is nothing, tell him. He need not trouble himself about me. I do not want him to speak of what I did that night."

"He said he couldn't help doin' as you wanted. You come to him that night like a sperit. He tried to talk about how you looked, and he fell to tremblin'. He told me he was afeard he spoke to you in some amazin' way, for he was dazed-like and took you for a ghost—the ghost of that one that he loved so—that's dead, you know. Might 've been he was feverish and not in his right mind."

"How is he now?" asked Melicent, hurrying away from a subject that it agitated her to think about.

"He says he's no worse, and he tries to be cheerful-like. He made me spell my lesson to him, and he sent funny messages to his birds. I carried him his squirrel, and he made him a little bed in the corner. He give me

this money to take back to you. They didn't find it, somehow, when they searched him."

"It is not mine, you remember. I bought the curiosities of him."

"But what good can money do him in there? And they say he'll never get out—never; and that after the trial they will put him in a dungeon, where it is dark and cold, and let nobody in to see him."

"He may get clear," said Melicent. "I am going to see my father. I will try to get him to do something for Ishmael. This money may help me to employ a good lawyer to take charge of his case."

Manch looked down thoughtfully, and seemed to wish to say something, that he yet hesitated to speak about.

"I went to the jail this mornin', intendin' to tell Ishmael something, but somehow I didn't; I thought I'd tell you about it first."

"What is it?"

"You know how I hurt myself?"

"The boy said you fell out of a tree when you were hunting birds' nests."

"I told him that; but it wasn't birds' nests I was after, you bet. I went to the old block-house, you know, to fix it up for Ishmael's hiding-place. I was making the ladder, and had my poles and pieces ready to nail, when the old hatchet broke off at the helve, and I hadn't anything to nail with. I happened to recollect how once, when I climbed into the block-house, I saw some pieces of old iron lying up there. So I climbed up 'Gallows Oak' and got on one of the limbs that's grown out close to the block house door. I thought I could swing myself in; but the limb broke off right at the fork, and down I

went and put my knee out of place. While I was crawl-in' and limpin' about, tryin' to walk, I happened to notice a queer-looking bundle half droppin' out of a hollow there was in the tree where the limb broke off. I thought at first it was a snake or a snake-shed, so I poked at it, and down it tumbled; and I picked it up and saw 'twas a strip of snake-skin wrapped round a old silk handkercher and a rusty knife. The handkercher was matted and stained, and the stain looked like blood."

Melicent started.

"Blood!" she muttered. "A rattlesnake's skin!"

"Here it is. I brought it with me to show to you."

He took the dark, scaly-looking roll from his pocket, and held it out to Melicent. She essayed to take it, but her hand dropped, and she shuddered and grew suddenly chill. She signed to Manch to unfold it, and he proceeded to unroll the strip of dressed rattlesnake-skin, upon which was visible a fragment of a vest-pocket. Inside was the remains of a yellow silk handkerchief, matted together with a dark substance that looked like blood, and wrapped in this was a clasp-knife with the large blade open and crusted with black rust. In a corner of the handkerchief the initials "H. B." were worked in black silk, and in the handle of the knife the same initials were neatly cut.

At sight of these things, Melicent grew so faint that she nearly swooned. Her mind flashed back over the gulf of years, and she seemed to see before her the body of the murdered miner as she had seen it lying, stiff and gory, on the bench in Jacob's store. Was this the knife that had struck that cruel, cowardly blow?—this, and not the silver-mounted Spanish blade? This knife, with the familiar initials upon it—did she not recognize it at once?

And that handkerchief with the black stains upon it, and the letters in the corner—were they not letters her own hand had worked?

She passed her hand across her forehead, as if to clear her brain. Was the fever returning? Was this one of the wild delusions of delirium? No, her brow was cool. The musty, moldy package before her was a reality. A horrible suspicion seized upon her mind. It was the murderer of the miner—the murderer of Colonel Archer's father—who had concealed these things; she felt an instant conviction of this. The stains of blood, the knife, the fact of the things being hid in the hollow of the very tree under which the murder was committed—more than all, the strip of serpent-skin vest, such as she well remembered the miner to have worn—all these corroborated the instinctive impression that had fastened upon her when she listened to Manch's story. It was easy to conjecture how the ghastly package had come to be hid in the hollow of the tree. The murderer had hastily wrapped the bloody telltales (the knife that had done the deed and the handkerchief that had wiped its stains from his hands) in a fragment of the snake-skin vest he had just ripped from the body, and cut to pieces to get the gold and diamonds that were quilted in it. He had then hurriedly thrust the bundle into the safe hiding-place offered by the small opening in the hollow trunk that had caught his eye, half concealed as it was in the fork of the tree. There, protected from rain and damp by the dry hiding-hole and the impervious scaly wrapper, the bloody evidences of crime had remained ever since, and were now almost as fresh as when put there. Melicent stared at them mutely, her faculties frozen by the horror of the new suspicion

that forced itself upon her. Manch saw that she shuddered and turned pale.

"I'll put these musty, queer-looking things out of your sight," said he. "They've made you sick."

"Nò—let me have them, Manch," she found strength to say. "Roll them up in that clean napkin there, and put them in the small drawer of that bureau; here is the key. Tell me, Manch, did you show these things to any one, or speak of having found them?"

"Not to a living soul—only you. I thought I'd show them to Ishmael, but something seemed to hold me back from speakin' about 'em until I'd told you. Do you think they've got anything to do with the man that was killed under that tree once—the one they say poor Ishmael killed?"

"I can not say. I will look into it better and think it over after a while. I can not think now; my head is confused. I must try to rest. I will go as soon as I can to my father. I will show these things to him, and will get him to see what can be done to defend Ishmael. I will see you again. You must come every day to see me while I stay, and meet me at the depot when I go. Let me see your faithful little face the last thing."

The next morning Melicent rose and dressed herself, and, pale and faint, but resolute, took steps preliminary to her departure from her husband's house. She dismissed Mrs. Simpson coolly, the doctor kindly, had the house set in order, and packed up a few of her own clothes. In an interview with the Honorable Mrs. Bradwell, which was forced upon her by that lady's irrepressible desire for information, Melicent baffled her curiosity, rejected her hypocritical pity, and defied her insinuated insults by

the queenly courtesy and impenetrable reserve of her manner. Not once did she betray how the covert stings of her visitor's talk wounded her; and none would have guessed, from the proud calmness of her eye and voice when she bowed adieu to the chagrined lady, how bitter were the tears she wept when she was alone.

On the night of the second day after her interview with Manch, Melicent sat in the dimly lighted parlor of the railroad depot, waiting to take her place in the cars of the eastern train. It was a dark, misty night. There were but few persons in the room, and Melicent thought silently and bitterly of the contrast between her going away from her Western home and her coming to it, a few short weeks ago. Then, it was a bright day in summer, and she was a happy bride. She had leaned on the arm and looked in the loving face of her husband. Then a crowd of admiring friends had made her coming an ovation, and met her with welcome and congratulation. Now, she was going alone, in the gloom of the night, with a heavier gloom of memory and foreboding upon her—bereft of her husband's confidence and protection—pointed at by the finger of calumny, with none to say "God speed" or lay a friendly hand in hers, save the little forlorn creature at her side.

Manch was there. He had come through mud and rain and darkness to say good-by. He had removed the old coat that had been thrown around him, and stood timidly at the door, but she saw him and drew him to a place near the warm stove. She wiped the rain from his face with her handkerchief, and wrapped around him the shawl she had worn over her cloak. She put a little purse of money, changed into small bills, into his hand.

"Don't put that into your 'bank,' Manch; it's to be used up before I see you again. You will want some clothes, you know, and Ishmael will need little things to make him more comfortable."

The engine gave its short preliminary whistle, and Melicent took her seat in the car, still keeping Manch at her side. She clung to his little brown hand, as if it was all that was left her of truth or affection on earth. When the final signal was given, and the train began to move, she drew him to her and kissed him, whispering:

"Good-by. Take care of Ishmael."

With that kiss thrilling him as though a goddess had bent down and touched him with her lips, the child was left standing under the car-shed, in the dull light of the lamps, looking after and wondering if he should ever see her again—the beautiful, pale lady, whom he worshiped as the embodiment of all he had ever dreamed of sweetness, kindness, and grace.

"She kissed me," he muttered to himself, looking down at his bare feet and ragged knees. "She kissed *me*—and she such a lady, with a mouth soft and sweet like a wild pink! And she tied her handkerchief round my head to keep the wet of my hat off my hair! Oh! she's kind and sweet—that lady is! I wish I could do something grand to please her. If I was only a man, I'd—*I'd fight for her*—I would!"

He stopped and looked down musingly as he traced invisible marble-rings with his bare toe.

"She looked mighty sorrowful-like," he said. "She's down-hearted about something. They say that husband of hers went off and left her sick without tellin' her good-by, and was mighty mad with her about going off that

night—and she was tryin' to help poor Ishmael. He ain't good enough for her to break her heart about. I'm bound I'll never throw up my hat and hooray for him any more—nary time."

He clapped the battered hat in question emphatically upon his head as he spoke, and trudged home through the rain and mud, still leaning a little upon the crutch, for his sprained knee was not entirely well. And at this time Melicent was whirling across the darkened country, with the landscape of hills and rivers, of fields and forests, flying past her like the panoramic scenes of a fever-dream; leaving far behind the home and husband in which she had lately been so blessed—home and husband hers no longer, but on which, she felt remorsefully, she had thrown the shadow of her own fate.

CHAPTER XIV.

WEARY and heavy-hearted after her long journey, Melicent found herself at the door of her father's house. All its elegant outdoor appointments were the same. The rich, dark-leaved shrubbery, the gleam of statues here and there, the fountain playing in the center of the small green square among the flowering oleanders, the lions couchant at the entrance among the tropic plants—all looked unchanged in the hazy light of the summer afternoon. Yet, since she had seen them last, what a change had passed over Melicent! The old housekeeper, who came out to welcome her, noticed it at once.

"How pale and worn you look!" she said. "You

must be tired to death. Go up to your old room and lie down, and let me bring you a cup of tea."

"Where is my father, Mrs. Morris? I thought he would meet me at the depot."

"He was meaning to do so, miss; but as he was getting in the carriage he had a note that called him away. I think I might guess who the note was from, and you know when a lady's in the case, then all other things give place, especially if it's *the particular* lady. Well, Mrs. Delavan is a very fine lady, you know—one of the very first. I think she wanted the Judge to go driving with her, to give her new horses a trial; and he couldn't say no, under the circumstances—you understand."

Melicent uttered a faint exclamation of surprise, but she was too languid to question Mrs. Morris as to the "circumstances" significantly alluded to; so, to the housekeeper's disappointment, she only said:

"I will not change my dress just now, Mrs. Morris. I will rest here on the library sofa until my father comes back. You can send me the tea, if you like."

She piled the pillows together and sank down upon the wide, comfortable divan, while the housekeeper dropped the heavy green curtains and noiselessly withdrew. Lying there, with the familiar book-shelves around her, and the marble busts of Cæsar and Pericles looking down upon her as they had done in other days, when she, her father's companion in his hours of study as well as of relaxation, sat here with her needlework or her drawing materials, while he, in his handsome dressing-gown, sat upright in the arm-chair near by (he never reclined), and wrote or read, often stopping to make some comment or to read some passage aloud to her; remembering this and

recalling her father's looks and voice, the dark thoughts and fears that had nearly driven her to the verge of madness seemed to roll away from her mind like a cloud. When she heard at length her father's step in the hall, her heart gave a throb of joy ; and when he stood in the doorway, she gave one glance at the pale, fine face, and, springing to him, clasped her arms about him, laid her head on his broad breast, and sobbed with hysteric passion. He soothed her, gently stroking her forehead as he had been wont to do when she was a child. Suddenly she drew back and looked up into his face—an anxious, intent gaze—wild, eager, searching. His drooped eyelids quivered a little, but his smile was calm and sweet.

“What is it, my daughter ?” he asked gently.

She answered by again dropping her head on his breast and weeping afresh, whispering :

“Oh ! I knew it could not be. Forgive me—forgive me, my father.”

He sat down and drew her to his side.

“Tell me all,” he said, when she was at last calm.

She went over again in detail all that she had told him in her letter. He listened silently, shading his eyes with his hand. When she had ended, he said with grave tenderness :

“You have acted with weakness, my daughter. That is now beyond recall, but happily not beyond remedy. It is fortunate that you have not betrayed your secret—and mine—to your husband. I will see Avery myself, and I think I can effect a reconciliation. I will write to-day and ask him to come here. In the mean time, remain with me until this cloud of trouble blows over. It will not seem strange that you have come at such

a time to pay me a visit on the occasion of my marriage."

He repeated the last words with emphasis before her wandering mind caught their meaning. Then she said half dreamily :

"Your marriage, father?"

"To take place next week. You know the lady—Mrs. Andrew Delavan."

He paused for her to take in the full import of the communication.

Yes, Melicent knew Mrs. Delavan—a showy, fashionable woman, past middle age, but wealthy, possessed of influential family connections, and ambitious of social distinction. Once, the announcement of her father's intended marriage would have been a disagreeable shock to Melicent; but late experiences had numbed her capacity for feeling slight disappointments. Judge Weir resumed the subject:

"After my marriage I shall remove from this house to Mrs. Delavan's residence, which is much larger and better located. I shall give up my present business and—probably—enter political life. I have accepted an unimportant appointment that will serve me as the stepping-stone to better things. My inclination has always been for public life, but I had first to make money. Gold is the key to political power. I shall soon hold it in my hand."

His eye kindled as he spoke; his voice, softly as it was modulated, had an undertone of excitement. Melicent had always suspected his inclination for the political arena. She had seen outflashes of the fierce ambition that was latent within him—the desire for power, for

rulership, which was in fact his master passion. Born orator as he was, with a faculty of magnetic influence, with keen insight into character, and a swift, strong will that carried obstacles before it, there was no reason that he should not succeed in his ambitious projects, now that he had wealth at his command.

His eye dwelt upon Melicent anxiously. She knew he expected her sympathy, but her heart was too heavy to respond. She could not hail the rising star when her thoughts were so full of one that seemed setting in the darkness of ignominy, and of another that was being clouded at its zenith by the shadow of her own ill fate. He saw the change in her face and said :

“You have worn yourself out fighting shadows, Melicent. Don’t go back to your Western home at all. There is no need that you should. No duty calls you there. Drop the brief, ill-starred period you passed there out from your life. Put its memories behind you. Enter upon a new phase of existence. Stay with me ; become the leading spirit of a bright, active coterie, with diplomacy and tact for your watchwords. Help me to achieve political influence. Mrs. Delavan will ably second you ; but you, Melicent, are born to be first.”

He put his hand upon her shoulder and looked at her, with the fire of his steady, resistless will burning in his eyes. For an instant its electric influence affected her. Then her color, that had risen, faded slowly, and she said with sorrowful decision :

“No, father, that can not be. I can not thrust the past out of sight ; it has too strong a grasp upon my heart. I will not wrong Mr. Avery by living with him again, even if I could be made his lawful wife ; but I can never

forget that he loved me and that I have ruined his life. And there is another—Neil Griffin. Surely, father, you understood me when I said the chief reason of my coming here was to get you to use every exertion in his behalf.”

He stopped in his rapid walk about the room and faced her, frowning darkly.

“You are mad!” he exclaimed. “What have you to do with him? You can not help him. Drop him at once; let go this wreck that is drifting to destruction.”

Melicent clasped her hands, shuddering.

“But he is innocent,” she said, in low, strained tones.

“Of what avail is innocence that can not be proved? How do you know that he is innocent? Have you forgotten the evidence? All will be ferreted out and brought up at the trial: the position in which he was found—the ring—the bloody knife—”

“There was another knife,” said Melicent slowly, as though constrained to speak against her will. “Another knife has been found—another clew—”

“Another knife? What knife? What clew?” he interrupted, in hurried, agitated tones. Then he added, more composedly: “Has anything new been discovered? I trust it may prove to the poor fellow’s advantage.”

Melicent sat still a moment; then she quietly reached a hand satchel she had placed on the floor at her feet, and took from it a small package which she proceeded to unroll. It contained the mysterious articles which Manch had found—the remnant of bloody vest, the stained silk handkerchief, the knife with the letters carved in the handle. Silently pointing to these, she raised her eyes to her father. For an instant he stared blankly at the

contents of the package. Then the proud calm of his face was broken by a ghastly contortion. He drew a hard panting breath, and laid his hand upon the table as if to steady himself. Almost instantly these signs of agitation were over. He had regained his composure. He stood calmly looking at the unsightly objects, and asked :

“What are these? Where and when were they found?”

“Not two weeks ago, in the hollow of the tree under which the murder was committed.”

“What have they to do with the murder? They may have been put there lately. They may have a story unconnected with crime.”

“Look at the blade,” Melicent said, putting the knife in his hand.

He shuddered as it touched his white, slender fingers.

“It is badly rusted,” he said carelessly, as he put it down and wiped his hand with his delicate cambric handkerchief.

“It is rusted with blood,” said Melicent.

“Very likely. Some hunter cut the throat of a deer or bear he had wounded, put his knife in the hollow of the oak, and went away and forgot it. Did you really think the finding of these things more than eight years after the murder could be brought up as evidence in poor Neil’s favor?”

“I—I do not know what to think!” muttered Melicent, looking at him with bewildered eyes.

“Think no more about it!” he said sternly. “Do not meddle again in this cursed business, I command you. You can do no good. The hand of Fate is in it. Keep away from this sinking wreck, or it will draw you down to destruction.”

"Alas!" sighed Melicent, "I feel I too am a wreck. The hand of Fate is upon me also."

He grasped her arm and drew her to him. He looked in her face with set mouth and eyes afire.

"You!" he cried; "you—*my* daughter, and talk like that! *You* sink down weakly and succumb to Fate! Struggle against it—defy it as I have done. Lift up your head, Melicent—this beautiful, proud head that seems made for a crown. Never let it be bowed down by the evil genius of my race. It has hounded me all my life, but I have fought against it, and will to the last. I will rise superior to Fate."

His raised hand fell with emphasis upon the table. He started—it had struck the sinister knife, the fragment of blood-stained handkerchief. Instantly the fire went out of his eyes; a gray shadow came over his face. He clinched the ill-omened bundle in his hand and said fiercely:

"Burn this miserable, moldy trash! It looks like the clap-trap of a voodoo conjurer."

But his spirit did not rise to its proud pitch again. He sat down and was silent and pale, looking down with compressed lips and a stern sadness on his brow. At length he raised his eyes and gazed earnestly at Melicent.

"My love," he said, "it grieves me to see you so changed. You have shed many tears, Melicent, since I saw you last. You have laid bitter blame on your old father, no doubt. You do not love me any more, my daughter."

That look, that voice! Melicent's heart would have sprung to meet it through all the barriers Fate could interpose. Unable to utter a word, torn by conflicting feel-

ings, she knelt down at his knees. Silently he caressed her head, her neck, throbbing with the emotion that quivered through her frame. As he looked down at her, his face became transformed. His brow knotted into wrinkles, the lines deepened about his mouth, his cheeks seemed shrunken. He looked ten years older than he had done a few moments before.

A knock at the door roused him. He lifted his head, and his face resumed its usual expression. He raised Melicent and placed her in a seat beside him as the door was opened by a servant.

"The groom wishes to know at what hour you will have the carriage at the door."

"Half-past eight," was the answer; and then as the servant retired he turned to Melicent and said:

"I am sorry to leave you, my dear; but I shall not be gone over an hour. A little select reunion at Mrs. Delavan's. Some distinguished relatives of hers are in the city *en passant*, and she is anxious I should meet them. I promised to look in for a moment only. I was specially charged to bring you if you should have arrived this evening. If you could feel equal to dressing and brightening up--"

"Oh! no," protested Melicent. "Go, of course; do not mind me; I shall be better here."

"You must rest, then. Sleep, and let dreams prophesy a bright future for you. I will go now and make some changes in my dress."

He drew her to him, kissed her forehead, and left the room. At the door he seemed to stumble, then Melicent saw him stagger, and springing to him she caught him in her arms. A spasm contracted his features for an instant.

“What is it, father?” she asked anxiously.

“Nothing,” he answered, after a short hesitation.

“A slight vertigo; it is not unusual.”

He put up his hand with his handkerchief in it to his forehead, but let it drop so hurriedly that Melicent looked and caught the gleam of the snake-skin fragment and the outlined shape of the knife wrapped closely round with folds of cambric handkerchief.

He kissed her again, this time upon her lips, and enjoined her to come down with brighter looks to-morrow. She followed him with her wistful, doubting gaze till the door of his dressing-room closed upon his tall figure, and then, sighing heavily, went, not to her room to rest, but back to the library to sink down in her father’s arm-chair and stare in wretched bewilderment at the marble-faced Cæsar on the mantel. Weary, perplexed, tortured in spirit, she was half ready to give herself up passively to her father’s will—to let him turn her thoughts, her life into new channels if he could.

“If I had but his will—his bold energy!” she thought.

“He says truly—he will rise superior to fate. Oh! it is not—it *can not* be so. He could not face life so boldly if—”

A loud cry startled her from her reflections. It echoed through the still house. Another! Melicent rushed out into the hall. A servant ran by her, crying:

“It is in my master’s room!”

She followed precipitately, burst into her father’s chamber, and beheld him clinging to the bed-post, his face purple and frightfully distorted, his eyes staring. What was it in that sight which made the scene under the “Gallows Tree” rush upon her memory, coupled

with the thought: "This face is like *his* that night; it is the face of a man dying by hanging"?

As they approached, he glared at them with glassy terror in his eyes, then suddenly loosed his hold and fell heavily to the floor.

CHAPTER XV.

APOPLEXY had suddenly smitten the strong, proud man at the moment when his hand was outstretched to grasp the goal to which he had so long aspired. During that long night and the succeeding day he lay unconscious—only his deep, stertorous breathing giving token that he lived. But his strong constitution rallied. The day following he unclosed his eyes and moved slightly. The physician said, in answer to Melicent's entreaty to let her know the worst:

"He will live, but I can not give you hope that he will be fully restored. Paralysis has supervened. His physical powers will never be the same."

"And his mind?"

"I fear it will never recover from the shock."

"Will he always continue in this state—this semi-conscious, dreamy condition—taking no notice of what is said or done around him?"

"I fear he will—for the present. Time may restore the healthy action of the brain; and there are instances where a counter-shock—some unexpected circumstance of danger, grief, or joy—has seemed to electrify the numbed faculties into sudden life."

Melicent turned away sick at heart. It was anguish

to see the father she had idolized a victim to this death-in-life. It was awful to behold this proud, intellectual, ambitious man reduced almost to idiocy—sitting propped with pillows in his bed or in an easy-chair, with his head drooping listlessly, his eyes half closed, opening sometimes with a vacant stare; partaking food readily when it was given him, but never speaking, unless it was in the vague, half-articulate mumble he uttered in reply to Melicent's anxious questioning. The first intelligible sentence he uttered was a shock to Melicent. He had been looking around in the vacant, bewildered way that had become habitual to him, when his eye rested upon his old rifle—the only relic he had of the past—suspended against the wall above his bed. He pointed to it with his left hand (he had not recovered the use of his right).

“Bring her to me, Milly,” he muttered; “I’ll rub her up a bit.”

It was a moment before Melicent comprehended him; then she took down the old rifle and brought it to him, watching his feeble, futile attempts to clean the rust from the lock and trigger. He shook his head sadly at length, and handed the gun back to Melicent.

“I’ll try her another time. Don’t forget to feed the dogs, Milly.”

“Milly!” He had never once called her by that name since their changed identities. He had gone back in mind to the old life at Bear’s Bend. Melicent sat and watched him, drearily wondering at the revenges and punishments of Fate. He had thought to rid himself of the distasteful past, to cast it off as a tree does its dead leaves, and put forth the vigor and energy of his being

in a new existence. And lo! here was the old life come back, and fastening itself upon him, to abide until the end! His dreams of wealth and fame had vanished like mist; and now the restless, seeking glance sees only the old gun that had been his trusty companion in the wild Western woods; now the mind that had grasped at the honors of statesmanship hovered vaguely over the thought of his hounds, and the lips that had seemed prophetic of grand forensic utterances now feebly entreated "Milly" to care for his dogs.

Melicent mused wearily over these things as she sat and held her father's hand, and watched the look of confused, childish distress that had come over his face when he found he could not handle his gun as of yore, fade into the dull vacancy that had become his habitual expression. His head slowly nodded as he sat before the fire, still keeping hold of Melicent's hand, as if that were the one plank that kept him from drowning. He clung to her as an infant to its mother, and kept up a low, querulous muttering whenever she was out of sight. He seemed not to recognize or to care for any one else. A few days after his sudden attack, the lady who would soon have been his bride drove up to the door in her handsome carriage, and rustled into the half-darkened room, where she performed a courtesy for Melicent's benefit, and then seating herself, proceeded to scrutinize the invalid, through her eye-glass, in the most deliberate manner. Then she examined Melicent and asked a few questions relative to the "sad affair," while she twisted the bracelet upon her arm and eyed the clasp as if she had never seen it before. When she rose to go, she gave the drooping, unregardful figure in the arm-chair another rapid

scrutiny through her glass, and shrugging her velvet-clad shoulders, remarked :

“Dear me ! what a wreck ! Ah ! this sad business—how it has aged him ! He looks quite old,” glancing at her own well-preserved face in the mirror.

It was Mrs. Delavan’s only visit. She came no more.

Melicent received similar “calls” from a few of her former fashionable acquaintances and some of the butterfly friends of her girlhood, who offered their condolences and informed Melicent that she was looking like a ghost. Of heart-felt sympathy and kindly help she received none. Her constant attendance on her father was lightened only by the assistance of a servant.

Other troubles came upon her. She found that her father was a bankrupt. He had risked and lost his fortune in large speculations, and his establishment had been kept up for some time past upon borrowed money. That had now to be repaid, with heavy interest. He had intended to do this and to reinstate himself by his marriage with the rich Mrs. Delavan.

Melicent learned from her father’s lawyer that there was nothing to be done—that the house, furniture, plate, everything, must go. An inventory was taken, the property was advertised to be sold, and the day appointed for the sale to take place. The servants belonging to the household all went save a single faithful old retainer. Melicent was permitted to occupy two rooms of the house until her father was able to be removed. Removed where ? The question, which but vaguely occurred at first to her bewildered mind, now pressed itself upon her more distinctly as the days went by and the time drew near when she would be forced to depart.

Yet no one came to offer even a temporary home to the helpless man and the delicate woman. What should she do? She had sent all the money which she had in her possession, which was only a hundred-dollar bill, in a letter to old Hagar, in which she entreated her to engage a lawyer to defend Neil. She made no explanation, except that she was interested in the case of "Ishmael" because of her friendship for Manch. This was the best she could do. There was no other person in Alluvia of whom she was willing to make such a request. She had now no resource but her jewelry, which she had already deposited at a pawn-broker's office, and had drawn upon it the money now being consumed in food, medicine, physician's attendance, and numerous other necessities.

It was the day before the one appointed for the sale of the house and furniture—a dark and dreary afternoon, with rain blurring the gloomy prospect of dripping eaves, muddy streets, and forlorn-looking passers. Melicent and her father sat around the dull fire that the chilliness of the afternoon made necessary. The invalid was occupied in making some calculation that seemed to have come into his enfeebled mind, for he counted his fingers over and over, and moved his lips as if reckoning numbers. Melicent was engaged in sewing, but her thoughts were not upon the work her hands executed. They were busy revolving the changes and cruelties of her lot; they were looking earnestly forward to discover some ray of hope. She had not heard of her Western home except through the two letters she had received from Manch; very short and concise they were, for the writing of them had been an herculean task to the boy. In the last one he had told

her that the trial of Ishmael "would come off next Monday." "It is then over by this time," thought Melicent. "Oh! if I could know the result!"

She feared the worst. She knew that Colonel Archer would leave nothing undone to convict the man he believed to be his father's murderer. She knew what an array of damning evidence could be brought up against the prisoner, and how little could be said in his defense. Manch's last letter had told of employing a lawyer who "shook his head and looked glum when granny stated the case to him."

"Must I tell him about the things I found in the hollow tree? And if they're any use, won't you send 'em by the express?" added Manch.

When she read this, Melicent wrung her hands in perplexed agitation. Those things found in the hollow limb of "Gallows Oak"—where were they? They were nowhere to be found. She had seen her father snatch them up contemptuously, calling them "voodoo trash"; she had seen him leave her presence with the package in his hand, while she, wrought upon by his subtle, controlling influence, made no remonstrance. Most likely he had destroyed them, as he had commanded her to do—burned them as soon as he entered the room. In the dismay that accompanied his sudden attack immediately afterward, and in the confused trouble that had succeeded, she had forgotten the mysterious package until it was recalled by Manch's letter. Then she had searched for it in vain. But, had she found it, would she have sent it to be produced at the trial? Could she have done so, fearing and feeling what she did? It would have been a trying thing to decide.

Inclosed in Manch's letter was a slip cut from one of the weekly papers in Alluvia. It was a eulogy of "Our Gallant Young Mayor." The editor said:

"He will yet put his enemies and detractors to shame. His speech yesterday was a grand effort—a triumph to his friends, a blow to his foes. Last night he appeared for a short time at the ball given by the 'True and Tried Society,' at the City Hall. He was presented by Miss Arabella Bradwell with a laurel wreath, beautifully formed out of wax by the fair fingers of the lovely belle. He responded to her poetical encomium by a brilliant and gallant little speech."

Then she had not ruined his life, after all; then he was still prosperous and honored. His admiring friends—females especially—no doubt applauded his desertion of "that creature" his wife, and congratulated him upon being rid of her.

"It is well," thought Melicent, pressing her hand upon her drearily aching heart—"it is well that he has been able to thrust aside all thought of me from his life as he would an obstacle from his path. It is well that I have not done him such bitter harm—that I have only tinged his history with a shade of melancholy that his commiserating lady admirers will think interesting and romantic. All the pain and all the shame be mine."

She sat still and listened to the moaning of the wind and the dull fall of the rain without, and saw her father mumbling in his arm-chair, and the old black attendant nodding comfortably in her corner upon the floor. A knock at the door aroused her.

"It is the man with the coal I ordered to-day; go and let him in, Martha," Melicent said. And then she

relapsed into bitter musings, and did not look up when Martha reëntered the room, accompanied by a man—did not look up until a voice near her said :

“Melicent !”

Then, with a wild, glad cry, she sprang to her feet, and would have thrown herself into the arms of her husband if those arms had not been tightly folded under his cloak, and the cold look and attitude had not utterly repelled her. She shrank back—the emotion of joy checked and recoiling upon her so suddenly that it inflicted the keenest pang. She recovered herself after a moment, and pointing to a seat, said :

“There is my father. You have heard of his condition, perhaps.”

He held out his hand to the invalid. The old man put his trembling left hand reluctantly out and looked up blinkingly at the tall figure and into the proud, handsome face. Then he shook his head, as if he disapproved of the new-comer for mysterious reasons, and began to call “Milly” in his childish, tremulous tones. She came and sat down by him, and laid her hand on his.

Mr. Avery, from his seat on the opposite side of the fireplace, regarded the two in silence. At last he said :

“I regret to see the change in your father’s health, and to learn the alteration in his fortune. I knew of both through the papers, and came on as soon as possible for the purpose of inducing you and your father to go back with me to my home in Alluvia. This house will be sold to-morrow. It is no place for you now.”

A flush shot up into Melicent’s white cheek.

“Your home is no place for me, Mr. Avery,” she

said, "since I have no place in your confidence or your esteem. It is impossible to accept your offer."

"Think of it again," he answered. "You have an invalid father, who has been accustomed to every luxury, as you have also. You have no money, and the moneyless have few friends. Come to my house. You shall have everything you want for yourself and for him, and I will not intrude upon you in any way—will not annoy you with my presence. Let considerations of duty to your father influence you. Come for the present; let it be a temporary arrangement if you wish. You have some property there—your furniture, silver, clothes, your horse and other things—which you will need to take with you or to dispose of."

"Send me such of the things as can be packed and keep the rest," said Melicent hurriedly. "I thank you for the offer of a shelter, but it would humiliate me to accept it. I can not receive a favor from one who wrongs me in his heart."

He looked earnestly into her face—at the pale brow thrown back and the dark eyes underneath, flashing through their unshed tears.

"Do I wrong you, Melicent?" he uttered. "Would to God I could believe it!"

The trembling passion in his voice wrought upon her far more than his appeals to her in the name of duty and self-interest had done. Still looking at her, he went on, sinking his voice to a deeper tone:

"The feeling that I can not believe it makes me the most unhappy man on earth."

"Unhappy?" she echoed bitterly. "The admired and courted candidate—cynosure of ballrooms and public

assemblies—recipient of ladies' smiles and laurel crowns—unhappy?"

"So unhappy," he answered slowly, "that when, four days ago, I saw a man condemned to the gallows, I felt I could almost change places with him, and accept a death of shame rather than a life of torturing recollections, of heart-souring doubts, and aching loneliness."

Melicent caught at the intermediate words.

"Condemned to the gallows!" she exclaimed, her voice eager and trembling. "Who was it you saw condemned?"

"A poor wretch who had long eluded justice," he answered listlessly; "the murderer of Archer's father, nearly nine years ago. There was no doubt of his guilt. The evidence against him was overwhelming—the defense a mere nothing; and yet—"

"What?" Melicent found voice to ask.

"His manner of receiving the verdict was another proof of how guilt can wear the mask of innocence," he said, looking at her with stern significance. "The murderer's countenance was calm, with even a sweet resignation in its expression. And when the sentence was pronounced, he did not seem to heed it; he was occupied in trying to quiet a boy—his child, I suppose—who threw the court into confusion, rushed up to the bench and shook his fist at judge and jury, and launched upon them a torrent of childish abuse. Then he made his way to the prisoner and fell into his arms, sobbing and clinging to him so that he could hardly be torn away. It was a striking scene."

He described it as if involuntarily—as if the impression it had made had been so vivid that he could not

help a passing allusion, although the subject was foreign to that which now engaged his mind.

Melicent had turned away and walked to the window. She stood there, pressing both her hands upon her breast, setting her teeth together in the effort to keep down the cry of agony that struggled for utterance. That picture of Neil's martyr-like endurance, of his sentence to an awful death, of poor Manch's despair—it was more than she could bear. Was there nothing to be done? No new trial to be obtained, no pardon to be procured? Should she let him suffer unjustly that fearful death—she, who *knew* him to be innocent? At least, she could see him; she could find what had been done, and what might be attempted.

It was long before she could speak. When she did so, she turned around and said in a voice of unnatural calmness:

“I have decided to go with you, Mr. Avery. When do you wish to leave?”

“To-morrow on the nine-o'clock train. I must return now to the hotel. I have business that must be attended to to-night.”

He was gone. From the window she watched him disappear in the rainy twilight. She sank down on her knees, and with raised, clasped hands cried wildly:

“Just God, be merciful! He must not die this shameful death—so innocent, so pitiful, so nobly self-sacrificing! Save my life from the burden of remorse that this death will bring upon it!”

CHAPTER XVI.

THREE weeks had gone by—weeks of bitter trial to Melicent—of wearing suspense and forced inaction—of final despair. She passed through this dreary period uncheered by any sympathy save that of Manch. No one but Manch and the old servant who had accompanied her ever entered her room. Mr. Avery had given up to her use the second floor of his house. He had all her physical wants attended to—meals of choice food, with wine and fruit, sent up to her regularly; but he never once ascended the stairs himself, nor sent a kindly message, a book, or other delicate token, to show that his care in providing for her proceeded from any warmer feeling than duty, pride, or perhaps pity. A few of her former acquaintances called to see her, but she shrank utterly from encountering their looks of cold curiosity or contemptuous pity. As she looked out over the town from the window of her room, she recoiled with almost morbid dread from the thought of going down into the streets and encountering their curious or scornful stare. It was long before she could even bring herself to glide down at dusk into the garden, and walk there like a ghost among the flowers she had loved, touching her hot lips to the cool faces of the roses and oleanders, and drawing in their perfume with passionate eagerness, as though they brought some breath of life and hope to her worn spirit. Except those few twilight moments spent in the garden, all her hours were passed in the secluded rooms up stairs, ministering to the half-torpid being who was her only companion. She would never have left this seclusion but for

the harrowing thought, the haunting picture of one who languished on the hard floor of a dungeon, condemned to suffer in a few weeks a terrible death. This thought, goading her to agony, drove her out into the street and into the office of the lawyer who had been employed in Neil's defense, to see what could be done to save him.

But she soon found that her efforts would be of no avail. The lawyer met her anxious questions with frigid assurances that the case was closed. There was no ground on which to obtain a second trial. The evidence against the prisoner had been too strong; the people's indignation had been too much aroused by the aggravated character of the crime; and superadded to this was the long-standing prejudice against the accused on account of his father, an executed felon, and his mother, a savage nuisance known as "Old Hagar, the Wildcat."

"The prosecution had it all their own way," said Mr. Quip—a slim, sallow personage, with an impertinent nose and his hair parted in the middle—as he tapped his seal ring with the ivory paper-cutter and eyed Melicent curiously—"all their own way. They brought in a couple of fellows who testified to having come upon the accused, stooping over the body of the murdered man, with a bloody knife—prisoner's own knife, produced and proved in court—in his 'red right hand.' It was furthermore proved, by the testimony of these witnesses and several others, that the prisoner confessed to having seen and known the murderer, but refused to tell who he was—an idiotic procedure that told strongly against him, because of its absurd untruth. The murdered man had spent the night with the prisoner—had shown him his treasure and the manner in which it was concealed. No one else in

the settlement knew of the miner, or of his possessing any wealth. And, to crown all, the accused at the time of his first arrest had in his possession a rough diamond ring that his own wife acknowledged had been shown to them by the man who was killed. Find me a tougher case, madam, if you can. I might have brought him off by pleading an *alibi*, had not his brother acknowledged to his lady-love that the pretended Ishmael was Neil Griffin, who it was supposed had been hung; and the prisoner insensibly owned the same upon his arrest and afterward. So you see there is not the slightest hope of a change in verdict, even if we should succeed in obtaining a fresh trial."

"But a petition to the Governor," faltered Melicent; "would there not be some hope in that?"

"Not the slightest," said the oracular Mr. Quip, biting the end of a cigar. "He wouldn't look at it unless there were plenty of signatures, and in this case it is doubtful if we could get one."

Melicent sat with downcast eyes and listened with the calmness of despair. Again she looked up, her countenance more agitated than at any time before.

"But if fresh evidence in favor of the accused could be brought up?" she asked, her voice husky and hesitating.

"Ah!" the lawyer said, becoming more attentive. "That would make a difference."

Then Melicent told him of the finding by Manch of the bloody handkerchief, knife, and vest in the hollow of the tree under which the murder had been committed.

"Can these things be produced?" he asked.

"I have seen them; they were in my possession,"

Melicent answered; "but they have disappeared. I have not yet been able to find them."

He put the tip of his forefinger to his forehead in meditative style.

"The finding, near the place of the murder, but more than eight years after it was committed, of a rusty knife, a stained handkerchief, and a bit of vest similar to that worn by the man who was killed, is worth nothing, unless the vest be identified as a piece of the one the miner wore at the time of the murder, and the other things be proved to have belonged to some person whom there is reason to suspect. Even in this case, the evidence would be but as a shadow weighed against the solid testimony on the other side; for would it not be urged as plausible that the accused, or one of his friends, had these things thus marked put in this concealment and found, or pretended to be found, by this boy—a kinsman of the prisoner—his sister's child, I believe, and known to be devotedly attached to him? His evidence would not be worth a dried pea. No, madam," continued the lawyer, rising and facing Melicent, "I don't consider there is any probability of the prisoner's acquittal, even if we could succeed in gaining him a new trial or in putting off the execution. I regret to inform you of this, seeing that you seem greatly and—pardon me—*strangely* interested in the case."

His manner was indifferent. Evidently he supposed there was not much profit to accrue to him from any further attention to this case. He knew Melicent's history, and that she was no longer the indulged wife of the rich mayor, with money at her command to gratify every caprice, even the very singular one of saving a poor devil's neck from the rope. He was burning with curiosity to

know why this case should interest a beautiful, high-bred woman like Melicent. He looked in her face with intense scrutiny as he repeated :

“ Very strangely interested indeed.”

Melicent gave no thought to him. She rose and drew her veil down over her pale face and weary, dark eyes, and, bowing slightly, left the lawyer to his conjectures.

What now should she do? She had wild thoughts of an interview with the Governor—of moving him by her earnest assertion of the prisoner’s innocence, and obtaining, if not a pardon, at least a reprieve or a commutation of sentence. But the Governor was absent ; he had gone to Washington City, and she had not money enough to seek him, nor could she leave her father for so long a time. All she could do would be to write to him an earnest, eloquent letter—as brief as might be, but expressing her firm conviction of the prisoner’s innocence, with many of her reasons for believing it. She would remind the Governor of the danger of admitting circumstantial evidence, however strong, when life and death were concerned. She would draw a truthful picture of what the prisoner had suffered—of his first condemnation and partial hanging by the mob—of his flight and wandering, poor and friendless, in many places—of his broken health, his patience and gentleness of nature. She resolved to close her letter by an eloquent appeal to the Governor to grant a pardon, or at least a reprieve, to this innocent and deeply wronged man. She revolved this letter in her mind as she hurried along the street, after leaving the office of the lawyer.

When she entered her room, she found Manch there, sitting by her father’s arm-chair and engaged in some

work that seemed to be of great interest to the old gentleman. He looked up delightedly as Melicent approached, and she saw that Manch had taken down the old rifle, and was giving her the thorough overhauling which her owner had attempted without success.

In these dark days, the only comfort that came to Melicent was through the daily visits of Manch. Usually he came every morning and helped her awhile in her care for her father—wheeling him about the room, or giving him his breakfast, or performing other little offices which the invalid would not permit any one else to do for him except Melicent. Often Manch would come in quietly and sit by Melicent almost in silence, which she recognized as a sign that he had just seen Ishmael, and that his heart was too full for him to talk even to her. Ishmael was the usual subject of conversation between them when they sat together, with the paralytic on the other side, his lame hand lying on Melicent's lap and gently rubbed by her fingers, while his eyes watched her every movement with the half-pleased, unconscious stare that one sees in an infant. On the table beside them there was always a bunch of flowers in a glass of water. These were for Manch to take with him when he went away. They were destined to shed their sweetness in a dungeon. Manch prevailed upon the jailer to take them to the prisoner when he carried in his food. The boy had once told Melicent how much pleasure a rose he had taken to Ishmael had seemed to give him; and ever afterward Melicent had stolen down at twilight, when the dew had freshened the flowers, and gathered a handful of the most fragrant for Manch to take at his early visit. The boy was now in the service of the jailer, and worked

to the utmost of his slender strength, in the narrow, dirty yard, for the privilege of being allowed to see his friend. Melicent found this out accidentally soon after her return. She was sitting with his little, thin, sun-burned hand in hers, when, feeling some irregularities in the palm, she looked and found them to be blisters.

"How have you burned your hand so, Manch?" she asked.

"It ain't a burn," he answered, blushing. "The axe is most too heavy for a light-weight chap like me."

"Why does not Gabriel cut wood for your granny? It is very hard in him to put it on you."

"Oh, it isn't granny that the wood's for. It's for Mr. Sampson."

"Mr. Sampson, the jailer?"

"Yes, 'um. He lets me take a jug of water to Ishmael sometimes, and I does jobs for him in the yard, and garden, and stable."

"You, Manch, so slight and delicate!—you, that love the free, green woods so well!" said Melicent, looking at him with tears in her eyes.

"I love Ishmael better," answered the boy; "and Mr. Sampson made objection to letting me in while I staid at granny's. He said I was 'a chip of the old block,' and might carry a bit of file, or a saw, or a knife in my mouth or my sleeve (as if poor Ishmael would use 'em if I did take sich things to him); but if I was stayin' with him in his house and workin' about his yard, Mr. Sampson said he'd feel safe enough to take me with him when he carried in the bread and water. I think it kinder cheers Ishmael and keeps life in him to see me. Anyhow, I can't stay away. His face keeps followin' me, day and night;

sleepin' or wakin', it's right afore me, with the eyes so big and strange-lookin' now since he's so wasted away."

"Is he so thin?" asked Melicent.

"Worn to a shadow," returned the boy, looking up at her with mournful eyes.

"Oh, Manch, you should get him to eat some of the things I send, and to take exercise—to walk briskly about the room."

"He don't like to hear the chains clanking," said the boy, looking down and speaking low. "He's chained, you know."

"Chained!" cried Melicent, with a piteous look into the child's face. "O God!"

She dropped her face upon her hands and shuddered. She must have known that it was customary to chain condemned prisoners, but she had not before had the picture brought up to her mind of "Ishmael," the gentle-hearted, chained like a savage beast—unable to move his limbs without hearing the clank of the cruel fetters! She felt so keenly how the sound must grate on the sensitive spirit of that simple, uncomplaining, but deep-feeling nature.

The poor paralytic in the arm-chair watched her distress with a look of dim trouble in his face. Finally, he put out his hand and patted her bowed head.

"Don't cry, Milly," he said; "don't cry. Be a good girl, Milly, and I'll make a lady of you yet."

And then when Melicent did not speak, he burst into tears, and began to rock himself back and forth, muttering, "O me! O me!" until Melicent put aside her own trouble and soothed him, getting him his glass of Sangor, and then sitting by him and singing the old songs he used to love.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE dreaded day rolled near—the day when “Ish-mael” should die upon the gallows. Melicent counted the days, and each one as it passed added heavier weight to her burden of distress—distress to which was added self-reproach, because she had made no effort to save him. She had a feeling sometimes as if she ought to go out and proclaim her conviction of his innocence, and all her reasons for believing it, even if those reasons should criminate another.

But what proof had she of his innocence? None. And what proof had she of the guilt of another? None; none but creeping suspicions, that sometimes coiled themselves fold by fold about her with the strength of convictions, and at other times—at the sound of a voice or the touch of a hand—shrank away and hid themselves in feelings of remorseful shame and pitying tenderness.

She had written the letter to the Governor of the State, which she projected—written it from her heart, with all the fervor and earnestness of strong feeling, and yet with ingenuity of representation that told of a subtile brain. In truth, the letter was a masterpiece of persuasion. She waited long for a reply. It came at last, written by the Governor’s own hand—a polite but firm refusal. He had examined into the merits of the case since receiving her communication, and had not been able to find any ground for a change of verdict. He most respectfully but decidedly declined to interfere with the sentence already passed by granting the prisoner a reprieve.

After this, Melicent made no further effort. Under other conditions she might have been more active, but late experiences had crushed down much of the buoyant energy of her nature. A despondent torpor crept over her, and she sat at her window and watched the days bloom and fade, and felt, as Ishmael had said, that life was "not much, after all," and said gloomily, "Fate will be accomplished."

Still, almost unconsciously, she cherished the hope that something would take place to prevent the execution. Surely it could not be! God would not suffer such a terrible wrong to be done. Something would occur to prove Neil's innocence.

But the day before the one appointed for his death arrived, and nothing had occurred. Melicent watched the waning of that day as if it were her last. She was alone with her father; there was not even Manch to comfort her. When he came that morning, he would only stay a few minutes, and when she pressed him to remain longer, he answered:

"I must go to him. They have given me leave to stay with him all day."

Melicent pictured the two to herself—as they sat in the gloom of the dungeon, holding each other's hands—in sad little talk about life, and death, and heaven; about Manch's future, the need of his always being true and honest, and of his trying to keep down his fiery little temper for his (Ishmael's) sake, and of his chances to pick up an education, that Ishmael was so anxious he should have. They would speak of her, and Ishmael would send her a parting message. What if he knew that she was his Milly—the child-wife he had loved so

dearly and whose memory was so sacred to him now? Would it comfort him to know it? No; it was better, far better as it was. Of what use would it be to mar the sweet and pure image of her that now lived in his soul?—the memory of the loving bride, the image of the angel Milly that should greet him beyond the shadow of death—of that awful death he was to die! No; she would not mar this sweet memory—she would not blot this cherished hope by showing him his Milly living, changed, married to another, a sad and stricken woman.

One thing made itself apparent even to Melicent's preoccupied mind: there was a change in her father. He had for several days seemed to be more restless—to take more notice of what was going on around him. Silent notice it was, for his mutterings had gradually ceased. To-day he seemed to Melicent to be watching her constantly and covertly, with a gleam of intelligent consciousness in his half shut eyes. He had been more than ordinarily wakeful. At last he slept, or seemed to sleep, and Melicent stole out for her usual visit to the garden.

Twilight had deepened into dusk, the moon was shining through a thin veil of clouds, as she glided about among the flower-beds and gathered for Ishmael his last bouquet—the pale jasmines and tea-roses, the pansies and violets that he loved—that would next morning carry him their last message of consolation. Would he guess how her hot tears had fallen upon their fresh leaves? No, he would never suspect what an intensity of pity and of self-reproachful anguish filled her heart for him.

When the flowers were gathered, she had reached the lower end of the garden, where there was a summer-

house of rose-vines woven with the interlaced boughs of crape-myrtle trees. She sat down upon a rustic seat inside its fragrant screen, with a feeling of relief that here she could give vent to her grief, undisturbed by that weird, semi-intelligent, but always watchful gleam in her father's eyes. She hid her face in the cool vines and sobbed passionately. She did not hear Mr. Avery's step or know of his presence until he called her name. She lifted her head and saw his tall figure standing before her in the dim light.

"Why do you weep so, Melicent?" he said, with mingled tenderness and bitterness in his tones. "Your lover lives; he is fully recovered, and no doubt eager to see you. You can be free, if you choose, to marry him."

Melicent made no reply. He stood looking down into her pale face with its look of patient sadness. Presently he said:

"It is late for you to be here. The night air is damp, and you have nothing around you."

He took up her shawl that had dropped from her shoulders and wrapped it around her.

"Come into the house," he said.

She went with him, still without speaking. When they reached the foot of the stairs, he said:

"Melicent, you are not happy here. In truth, it must be a wretched and lonely life for you. What can I do for you? What do you wish?"

"I am going away," she said quickly. "Do you think I would stay here to be a burden and a shame to you? I only consented to come for a purpose; that has been accomplished, or at least is no longer to be considered. I am going away the day after to-morrow."

“With that man?—with Archer?”

“Never!” she cried, with indignant passion. “Do not insult me, Mr. Avery. For the sake of the merciful Saviour have pity! Do not mock my misery. There is no thought of Colonel Archer in my mind. Do you not see it? Are you so blinded by suspicion? No, I am going away—where, I do not know. I am going with my old father to find work and food and shelter—some—where—anywhere but here. I will take nothing from you; do not offer it. I have imposed upon you too long. It was kind; it was generous; it was a deed of charity, and I feel it as such.”

“It was nothing but what was due. You bear my name; you are legally my wife.”

“Ah! not even that,” she began. “Stay! do not speak—do not question me now; I can not answer you coherently. There is something I must tell you—something I ought to have told you long ago; but my mind has been so confused, so torn by conflicting feelings. After to-morrow I will tell you all; and then, Aleck, I will go away out of your sight for ever. I will bring reproach to you no longer. I will take my shadow from your threshold, and leave you free and happy—yes, I pray God, Aleck, you may be happy.”

She turned from him and went slowly up stairs, leaving him standing with his head bent and his forehead corrugated by painful and perplexing thought.

CHAPTER XVIII.

At the first gray light of the morning Melicent opened her window, that the cool wind might revive her. She was oppressed, stifling with the burden of that long night's sleepless wretchedness. She had lived through it, but she felt as might the victim borne from an hour's racking upon the torture-wheel.

She sat at the window looking out, while the sky changed and grew brighter and more glowing, until the sun burst forth through the gold and crimson glory.

"The last sun he shall see," thought Melicent, and she turned quickly away, as though the brightness jarred upon her sick heart. As she did so, she saw that her father was lying awake upon his bed, and that his eyes were turned to her with a keen, anxious look, utterly unlike the dull, mechanical gaze with which he had been wont to regard her before, or at least until within the last few days.

Wresting her thoughts from that maddening center round which they whirled, she forced herself to perform for her father the usual little services which he was accustomed to receive from her—bathing his face and hands, combing his hair that had so whitened within the last few weeks, and adjusting the pillows, that he might rest comfortably until it was time for him to be dressed and seated in his chair. When she had finished these wonted attentions and was standing absently smoothing the hair from his forehead, while her thoughts were elsewhere, he suddenly drew her down to him, clasped her with his arm, and kissed her. The circumstance surprised her; it was the

first time he had kissed her since the night he was attacked. She felt a tear drop upon her cheek—a single large, hot drop, unlike the tears he had often shed in his fits of childish weeping. It was as though this single tear had been wrung from his brain by the strong grasp of anguish.

“My father, are you feeling worse?” Melicent asked, bending over him.

He shook his head, but did not speak, nor lift his face, that was bent down upon his hand. Melicent stood by him until he raised his head and laid it back upon the pillow, closing his eyes as though to sleep. Had she noticed closely, she would have seen, by the quiver of the eyelids and the twitching of the muscles about his mouth, that the slumber was only apparent. But Melicent’s mind was too deeply preoccupied for any such observation.

The execution of Neil was to take place at nine o’clock. Manch had told Melicent that he would come to her this morning for a little while, to bring any word that Neil might wish to send, and then return, that he might go with his friend to the place of execution and stand by him to the last moment.

It was now eight o’clock. Melicent had sent away her untasted breakfast, and now, with clinched hands and pale drawn lips, she walked the floor in the restlessness of grief. A low knock at the door made her start and stop in her aimless walk. Manch stole softly in and stood beside her. He was neatly dressed in a black suit that Melicent had had prepared for him. He silently put his hand in hers, and she pressed it convulsively, unable to speak, and looked down into his pale face in dumb in-

quiry. In answer to the look he said, speaking with the huskiness of restrained feeling:

“He’s wonderful calm this morning. He sent his love to you and told me to bring little Bunch to you for a keepsake. He knew you would take care of him.”

He put his hand in the bosom of his shirt and took out the little squirrel, that nestled in his hand and peeped out shyly with blinking eyes, having been so long accustomed to the prison gloom. Manch held his head down and stroked the silky fur of the squirrel in a rapid, mechanical way, as if to keep down the tide of feeling struggling in his breast. Melicent made him sit down; then she took the little prison-pet gently in her hand.

“Tell me,” she said, when she could trust herself to speak—“tell me all he said, Manch. Did he express no wish?”

“He told me where he wanted to be buried. It is close by the river, not far from where granny lives, where a house was burned down a long time ago—by the Injuns, I reckon. There’s an old oak-tree there with half of it killed by the fire, and under it’s a grave that Ishmael used to go to of nights and pull away the weeds and grass from it, when he first came back. He wants to be laid alongside that grave. There’s where she’s buried, he says—she he calls Milly.”

Melicent made no comment. She struggled hard for composure before she asked another question.

“He is calm this morning, you say? Does he not seem to feel the horror of that dreadful death?”

“Not now,” answered the boy. “He told me he used to shiver and turn cold when he thought of dyin’ that shameful way, you know, and he would dream of all the

people with their faces turned up, glarin' and hissin' at the murderer and wretch they would take him to be. But that's all done with now; his mind's at peace. He prayed last night; I never heard such a prayer. He thought I was asleep, but I hadn't closed my eyes. He prayed 'Christ, help me,' over and over on his knees, upon the cold, damp floor, and at last he said twice, 'Thy will be done.' Then he lay down and went to sleep. I listened to his breathin', calm as a baby's, and at last I fell asleep myself. When I waked up it was broad day, and Ishmael was sittin' by, watchin' me with such a sweet smile on his face—as sweet and peaceful-like as you've seen in the pictures of Jesus in the church. He kissed me and said: 'I've had such a sweet dream, Manch. I thought I saw Milly, and she came to me dressed all in blue like the sky, with white lilies in her hair, and she held out a nose-gay of the most beautiful flowers. Just as I reached my hand for it I woke, but I feel her smile deep down in my heart. It warms all the chill there and takes away the pain of death, for I shall see her, Manch; as sure as I am to die to-day, I'll meet her in the only world that's fit for such as her to live in.' ”

The child's voice sank to a husky whisper. Melicent sobbed aloud. Neither of them noticed the old man sitting silent in his chair, until the sound of a deep groan made Melicent start and look up in alarm at her father. She ran to him quickly, but he gave no other sign of pain, and he motioned her aside, muttering that there was nothing the matter.

In a little while Manch went away, carrying the flowers to Ishmael, with Melicent's kind love and her prayers for the peace and repose of his soul.

It was a beautiful Indian-summer day. A light haze veiled the sky—a delicious softness pervaded the air.

“It’s a fine day for de hangin’,” said old Margaret, as she wheeled her master’s chair close to the open window, “and dere’ll be a heap of folks dere to see it. Dey’ve been comin’ in town ever since sun-up. I ain’t been to a hangin’ not in five year, and I’d like mighty well to see dis here one. Dey say he’s gwine to make a speech on de gallows, and make a clean bress of it den. He ain’t ’fessed a word to de minister, and he so nigh to judgment, and lookin’, dey say, like death’s got a grip on him a’ready, and ’bout to cheat the gallows out of its jess due. Good Lor’! here’s a ox-wagon full of folks, wimmen and chillen, come in from de country, gone drivin’ right on to de jail. Dey goin’ to git out dere and walk along wid de percession and de hangman’s cart. Wish ’twould come by here, but no such good luck. Everything has to go ’long by Trenton Street, whether it’s a circus-band or a funurl.”

As old Margaret mumbled on with the familiar garrulity of an old and indulged servant, she arranged the footstool and the chair-cushions for her master, whom she had come to regard as a large-sized infant, to be carefully attended to as to comfort, but not otherwise regarded—supposing him incapable of taking intelligent notice of what was going on. If she had looked into his face while she talked, she would have changed her opinion. Its expression would have checked the words on her lips and made her withered hands tremble and drop in scared surprise.

Unable to restrain her feelings, Melicent quitted the room, and, shutting herself in her closet, knelt upon the floor, with the crucifix pressed to her breast and dumb

prayers upon her lips. Here she meant to remain till the fatal hour had passed.

Meantime old Margaret, while pretending to feed the squirrel in its cage, kept a close lookout from the window. The distant, confused sound of many voices, pierced with occasional shouts, which she had been hearing for some time, seemed to grow nearer—to mingle with the tramp of feet and the rumble of wheels. Suddenly the foremost object of a miscellaneous procession turned the street corner upon which Mayor Avery's house was situated. It was the hangman's cart old Margaret had spoken of. It was driven by a huge black negro, in red flannel shirt-sleeves; on either side of it was an armed man to guard the prisoner, who sat inside upon a rough, black coffin, his hands bound behind his back. The face of Neil Griffin, though pale and emaciated, had a tranquil, even sweet expression. His eyes had no longer that wild, haunted look, but were full of the sad calm of a spirit that had done fighting with Fate or flying from her pursuit. As he sat there, the target of so many curious eyes, there was no sign of agitation apparent beyond the occasional quiver of the lips and twitching of the eyelids. His eyes rested upon Manch, who sat at his feet on the floor of the cart, with his head bent down upon his tightly clinched hands.

"Blessed God!" cried old Margaret, "if here ain't de percession comin' right under our window! There he is—the black-hearted murderer, Neil Griffin—a-ridin' on his own coffin!"

She thrust her head over the casement and looked down eagerly. She did not see what took place just behind her. She did not see the man that had been paralyzed

rise to his feet as if suddenly drawn up by some resistless hand, and stand beside her, his face ghastly and his wide, dilated eyes staring out upon the street. She did not see him until he touched her shoulder as he leaned forward. Then she turned and saw erect him whom she had never expected to see stand again—saw his face, his eyes, and shrieked in terror. At the sound, the people passing below looked up. Many faces were upturned, but the man at the window saw only one—that pallid face—the big, hollow, mournful eyes of the man in the cart—the man who sat upon the coffin his body was to fill. As those eyes met his, the face of the old man became terribly convulsed. He beat the air with his arm; he struggled to speak, and at last one word burst from his lips in a mighty volume of sound.

“Hold!” he shouted.

Every figure in the procession stood still—every face was lifted to the window whence the command proceeded. One instant only; the next, old Margaret had recovered from her fright, and, appearing at the window, called out shrilly:

“Don’t mind him! He’s done been sick, and is crazy-like!”

The old man did not gainsay her statement. After uttering that one word, he stood as if transformed to granite, staring blankly down at the prisoner in the cart, over whose own face there had passed an instantaneous and singular change—an expression of wild amazement, doubt, perplexity; then, in a twinkling, the shade of doubt grew fainter, and the prisoner slowly shook his head. Had he recognized the man overhead? and was this a sign for him to keep silent?

The crowd, that for an instant had been breathlessly impressed by the tragic look and voice of the man at the window, now moved on with jeers, hisses, and laughter. The black driver of the cart cracked his whip and showed his teeth with a good-humored oath, and the procession moved on, leaving the tall figure of the gray-haired man still standing at the window. But now his daughter had come to his side. Startled by that loud cry, Melicent had risen from her knees, and, hurrying into the room, had found her father standing erect and staring out into the street—at what spectacle she could guess too well. She was not so utterly amazed as the old servant had been, for she had noted for some days the change that was taking place in her father's condition. She laid her hand upon his arm and drew him gently from the window.

“Come away, dear father. It is time for you to lie down and rest.”

He gazed at her as one just aroused from a dream.

“No,” he said, “I am going. I must follow him. I must lose no time. Let me go.”

“Father, be quiet, I entreat you. You are too ill to go out. You are not able—”

He stepped forward into the middle of the room, and said with his old calm authority :

“Margaret, get my hat and my coat at once—my best black coat ! Melicent, I am going—do you understand ?”

Was it only his will that had been paralyzed, or had a sudden shock restored him, even as one had smitten him ? Or was this the unnatural strength and activity that sometimes precede and betoken death—all life's forces concentrated in one last struggle with dissolution ? However it was, he stepped forward almost in his old stately way,

and his voice had all its firm utterance and self-command. Melicent saw the stern, steady gleam in his eye, and she knew that he was resolved. Resistance to his will was useless. She fell at once under the influence of that masterful will, yielding passive acquiescence to his wishes, as she had been wont to do.

"Go, Margaret, immediately, and get a carriage—a cab—anything," she said.

"Let it be brought at once," ordered her master. "It must be here in five minutes. And meantime, Melicent, bring me my clothes—my best suit. I would be dressed well on my first public appearance in your city."

He smiled—a ghastly gleam of merriment, that crossed his face like a lurid flash of lightning, and left it darker than before. He spoke no more until he was dressed.

"Bring me the steel casket, Melicent—it is here."

"It is, but it is locked and the key can not be found."

"Bring it; I will find the key."

She opened an armoire in the room and took from it a steel box with handles. It was the only one of their possessions he had taken any note of when they were leaving his home. He had pointed to this, and intimated his wish that it should be brought. No key could be found to it, but Melicent supposed it to contain papers of importance. As she put it before him now, he took from his neck a small black cord, to which Melicent saw that a key was attached. He unlocked the box and took from it a small bundle rolled in a white handkerchief, not so securely but that, at the ends, could be seen the dim glitter of a serpent-skin and the rough handle of a knife. Melicent turned cold and faint when she saw him thrust

this package into his bosom. At the same moment old Margaret entered the room.

“A carriage is here,” she said.

He turned to Melicent. A tumult of feeling convulsed his brow, but he controlled himself.

“My daughter,” he said, “you will go with me?” Then he looked at her and added hastily: “No, no—you could not bear it. Remain here, Melicent. Kiss me, love, and stay until—”

His voice faltered; he held out his arms in silence. She realized then what he was about to do. She sprang into his arms and clung to him with passionate tenderness.

“Father, I will go with you anywhere. I will never forsake you.”

The spirit of woman’s devotion was upon her.

“I have stood by thee in thine hour
Of glory and of bliss;
Doubt not its memory’s living power
To strengthen me through this.”

He clasped her tenderly, and a tear gathered in his eye. Hastily he dashed it off.

“Let us go at once!” he exclaimed. “God grant I may not be too late!”

She assisted him down the steps. In the hall he seized a stick that hung against the wall, and with this he succeeded in reaching the carriage.

“Drive on,” he said, as he entered it; “drive as fast as your team can go.”

“Where?” inquired the man.

“To the gallows!” he answered; and again that gleam of grim mirth swept across his lips.

“Melicent,” he said, “I have told you my ambitious plans; I talked to you of my anticipated rise in life. Behold! here is the rise—the scaffold of a gallows!”

Melicent could not reply, and he spoke no more during the ride, except to urge the man to “drive faster,” as he leaned forward and looked anxiously before him.

The place of execution was upon a hill a short distance out of town. They came in sight of it at last; they saw the gallows on the brow of the hill, clearly defined against the sky. Three figures stood upon it—the sheriff, who was also the hangman, the prisoner, and the faithful child. The dense crowd that surrounded it was still as if hushed into awful expectancy.

“Faster!” cried Judge Weir hoarsely, seizing the whip and lashing the horses with his own hand. Snorting in terror and straining every muscle, they sprang up the long hill with furious bounds.

Melicent saw the hangman approach and lay his hands upon the prisoner. Instinctively she uttered a low scream.

“No use to go any farther,” said the driver. “It’ll all be over in another minute, and we can see it here as well as nearer. Couldn’t get through that crowd nowhere.”

“Drive on!” thundered the old man at his side; then suddenly he waved aloft a white handkerchief he had hastily attached to the stick.

“A reprieve! a reprieve!” he shouted in that tremendous voice that seemed made to shake the nerves and trample upon the wills of ordinary mortals.

The crowd heard. They turned as with one impulse

and beheld the carriage driven toward them with such furious speed, and the imposing figure in front holding aloft the fluttering white signal.

“A reprieve! a reprieve!” they echoed, and parted right and left, leaving a space, through which the carriage was driven to the scaffold’s foot. Then its occupants descended from it—the old man calm and determined, leaning upon the daughter, who kept her consciousness in that dreadful moment only by the strength his magnetic power imparted. As the wind blew back the hood of the silk mantle which old Margaret had thrown around Melicent, and disclosed her features to Mr. Avery, he uttered an involuntary exclamation and started forward from his position among the crowd nearest the scaffold. But something in her eye warned him not to approach her. He had no part in this drama; she would not involve him in its shame and grief.

At the foot of the scaffold her father took his hand from her arm.

“Remain here, my daughter,” he said, pressing her fingers in a strong, convulsive grasp. He signed to the sheriff, who came down from the platform and paused expectantly at his side.

“Support me up to the scaffold.”

Bowing respectfully to the request of the distinguished-looking man, the officer gave him the aid of his arm to assist him up the steps of the platform. As Melicent saw him ascend that instrument of ignominy and death, her courage gave way. The murmur of the crowd sounded in her ears like the rush of many waters; a mist came before her; she felt herself tottering, and instinctively stretched out her hand to find support. It was seized by

hard, bony fingers, and an arm grasped her waist and upheld her with fierce strength.

“Don’t faint,” said a voice in her ear, which she knew to be Hagar’s. “Don’t give ’em a chance to gloat over you, Milly. I knew *him* just now, the minute I saw his eye, and now I comprehend all that’s happened. You’ve tried to save the poor boy, my gal. You’ve done him all the good you could, but the hounds wanted blood. They’ve been barkin’ at *you* too ; I’ve heard of it. Hold up your head and show ’em if they do silence you they can’t crush you. Burn ’em with your eyes and curse ’em in your heart as I do !”

Her eyes glared around with fierce defiance, for there had been an attempt, on the plea of her violence, to keep her away from the execution and the last sight of the son she had not been permitted to see while he lay in prison. Her voice rose as she spoke, and she shook her clinched hand at the spot where the mayor and aldermen stood. But no notice was taken of her now. All eyes were fixed upon the scaffold, all ears were strained to hear the message of reprieve brought by that stately old man with the long, gray hair. He had declined further support from the sheriff, and, stepping a pace in front of him and of the prisoner, he stood with his tall form erect, his gray head bare to the sky, in sight of the silent and waiting multitude.

“People of Alluvia !” he cried, in that rich, powerful voice that rang to the uttermost limits of the crowd, “I am here to free your prisoner—to proclaim his innocence and send him down from the scaffold, not only free from the taint of blood-guiltiness, but crowned with the honors that belong to the martyr. He is innocent of the crime

for which he has been condemned. The one who did that deed stands before you now. I alone am the murderer of Marmaduke Archer!"

For an instant there fell upon the assembly the silence of the grave. Then a faint murmur arose that rapidly increased to a tumult of sound. In the midst of it Mr. Avery sprang upon the scaffold-steps and waved his hand excitedly.

"Fellow citizens!" he cried, "I beg you will give no heed to the declaration you have just heard. It is the utterance of a deranged mind. This gentleman knows no more about the murder than you or I. He is a stranger in this place. He was only brought here an invalid a few weeks ago. He is my wife's father—Judge Weir—a highly respected citizen of St. Louis, and a most able lawyer until his mind was injured by a recent stroke of apoplexy. I call upon his physician, Dr. Wilson, who is present, to certify if this is not true."

Dr. Wilson arose, and in a few words corroborated the statement of Mr. Avery that Judge Weir had been lately brought to Alluvia an invalid, with his mind greatly impaired by a paralytic attack.

Turning then to Judge Weir and preparing to approach him, Mr. Avery said gently:

"This excitement is too much for you, sir. You are too ill to be out. Come down with me, I entreat you, and return home for your daughter's sake."

It was noticed by the spectators that at this instant the prisoner, who had before seemed bewildered with astonishment, now stepped to the side of Judge Weir and said a few words in a low tone that seemed to be of entreaty. They were answered by a swift gesture of dis-

sent. Then, checking the approach of Mr. Avery and the physician with a glance and a wave of his hand, he said decisively :

“No, I will not come down from this scaffold until my will is accomplished. I came here to save the life of this man, who would have sacrificed himself through devotion to—another.”

Then, lifting his brow and raising his voice to the thrilling pitch that hushed every whisper, he continued :

“People of Alluvia, your mayor is wrong. It is true I have been ill, and bodily disease may have clouded my intellect; but Fate has to-day swept the mists away with one mighty stroke, and as I stand here this moment, my brain is as clear as the sanest among you. Deliberately and in my right mind, I declare to you that I committed this deed for which Neil Griffin has been condemned to die.

“Mr. Avery is wrong upon another point. He says I am a stranger in this place. Why, every foot of its ground is familiar to me. On that hill yonder I headed the handful of settlers that routed the thieving red-skins, rescued two women and a girl, took back the horses that had been stolen from us, and captured their great chief, Wingino, after his tomahawk had descended here upon my forehead. Don’t you remember that day, boys? Tom Reed, Dick Allan, and you, Fighting Bob—don’t you remember—Captain Brown?”

“Ay! ay! ay!” shouted the men addressed, and a dozen others who recognized the speaker, and rose to their feet waving their hats and gesticulating wildly.

“Great thunderation!” “Is it you, Cap’n, and no mistake?” “That’s him! I’d know his voice if I was

dyin'!" "Hurrah for the Fightin' Bear of Bear's end!" "Hurrah for Cap'n Brown! He ain't dead, after all!"

These and other enthusiastic exclamations broke from the excited settlers, who recognized their old leader in the battle and the chase.

For an instant a flash of the old fire gleamed in the chieftain's eye, then as suddenly died out. He staggered back a step and pressed his hand to his brow. His ashen cheek and writhing lip told of a fearful struggle going on in his breast. It was the death-throes of the instinct that was mighty as life within him—the instinct of leadership—the wild, bold spirit of the born chieftain.

Once more he advanced to the front of the platform.

"Silence!" he cried with fierce energy and a gesture of imperial command. "I am here, not for an ovation, but for a confession; not to receive friendly recognition, but to accept doom. It is true, I was known among you as Captain Brown, but my true name is Weir. It was the name I bore when I fled from my own State of Alabama, with the stain of blood on my hands, and reached your settlement at twilight of that autumn day with my brave horse staggering under me and a little child in my arms. That child sits there," he said, pointing to Melicent, who sat at the scaffold's foot, unable longer to stand, even with the assistance of old Hagar.

"For her sake, as well as of Neil Griffin's, I will tell my story. She has suffered because of my acts. She has been the victim of unjust calumny. To clear her from wrong, to save him from the scaffold, I stand here and confess what else would have gone with me to the grave.

"I was born in Alabama. At fourteen I still had a father, a mother, and a home; at fifteen I was orphaned and beggared. One man did it—Marmaduke Archer. He swindled my father out of his property and turned him from his home in the dead of winter. Unaccustomed work and exposure brought on rheumatic fever, of which he died. My mother survived him but a few weeks. I was thrown upon the world at the bottom of Fortune's ladder, but I was bold and resolute. I determined to mount it. I studied day and night. I worked every scheme to become popular—to learn every hidden spring by which men are moved. Finally, I became a candidate for office. I had every prospect of success. I had just spoken to a large assembly—an off-hand speech that had stirred enthusiasm and created applause. Marmaduke Archer came forward. Snake-like, he had struck at me many times in secret; now, backed by his party, he made bold to strike openly. His speech was the bitterest personality. He professed to dig up old family secrets; he flung odium on my father's name, on my mother's honor. I listened till my blood was fire. I sprang upon the platform, caught him by the throat and hurled him to the ground. His head struck a stone; he lay motionless, and they thought him dead.

"I was arrested, confined for days, and released when it was found that Archer did not die. The day afterward I left the place that had become hateful to me. Before I went, I had an interview with the woman who had promised to be my wife—a stolen interview, for she was the ward of Marmaduke Archer. She was the one being I cared for on earth. I loved her with all the strength of my soul. I had loved her since she was a child. I

believed her when she promised to be true to me until better fortune allowed me to return and claim her.

“I went to Cuba and joined Lopez. I threw myself into the whirlpool of that reckless revolution, and was speedily stranded on the rock of captivity. I spent three years in a Spanish prison, two years more in earning money to return other than as a beggar. I went straight to my native town. As I rode into it at sunset, I met a girl coming from the village—her fair head bare, a hat upon one arm, a little basket of oranges on the other. She did not recognize me, but I should have known my Madeleine among a thousand. I turned my horse’s head and followed her. She entered a little cottage by the road. I stood at the window and watched her unseen. A man sat in the room with a little girl asleep on his knee. He rose, laid the child in its crib, kissed my betrothed, and called her ‘wife.’

“My Madeleine caressed and called ‘wife’ by another man! My Madeleine, whose memory had kept me alive all those dreary years!—who had sworn to be faithful to me—whose name had nerved me in battle, had been whispered in my prayers, and called upon deliriously in prison! I could not bear it; the blood rushed to my brain; I leaped in at the window and stood before her. I upbraided her with falsehood, and she wept and trembled. Her husband interposed; I cursed him, and he struck me. I sprang upon him, and we fought like two savage beasts, while she stood by, shrieking and praying. At last he got his knife in his hand, and made a lunge at my throat. I wrested the blade from him and drove it to the hilt in his own breast. He fell back, gasped, and all was over. I looked down at an innocent man dead

by my hand. At a little distance lay his wife in a heavy swoon. As I raised her, I saw a vial half filled with dark fluid grasped in her rigid hand ; drops of the brown liquid were on her lips. It was laudanum. Crazed with fright and horror, she had swallowed the poison. I was a double murderer.

“She did not die until far in the night. She revived. She forgave me and told me all. She had never been false to me in heart. She had received no word from me since I left. Her guardian, Marmaduke Archer, had shown her a letter announcing that I was dead ; that I had been killed in fight. After that she had lost heart, and allowed him to persecute her into a marriage with a man who suited him, because he was not likely to make difficulties about her fortune, which he (Archer) had spent. So, all this was the work of my arch-enemy.

“Here was another heavy account to be scored against the villain who had ruined my life. Over the dead man I had killed and the dying woman I loved, I swore a desperate oath to be revenged on Marmaduke Archer. But my vengeance must be delayed ; he had gone to California, to be absent for years. Madeleine told me this. Then she besought me to go—to save myself by flight, before this night’s work was discovered. She told me she had never ceased to love me, and with her dying breath left her child to my care—the child that I had made an orphan. O God ! the horror and remorse of that night ! I held my poor Madeleine in my arms till she expired ; then I sat down beside her stupefied with despair. The touch of a little hand aroused me—the sound of a little voice calling to ‘mamma’ to ‘wake up,’ made me start to my feet. It was the little child, who had slept through

all this horror, and who was now trying to wake her dead mother with kisses. She looked at me with scared, beseeching eyes. That look brought a swift revulsion of feeling. The poor mother had begged me to care for her child. I had meant to end my own wretched existence; now I threw down the bottle of laudanum and took the child in my arms. Then I first became aware that the room was on fire. Some burning brands upon the hearth had become scattered in the scuffle, had ignited the clothing on the walls, then the dry pine planks, until now the wall was ablaze. The thought rushed upon me that the flames would conceal the evidence of my deed. I caught up the child, ran from the house, leaped upon my horse, and rode rapidly away from the scene, with the child on the saddle before me.

“Days afterward I reached this place—then a border settlement, called Bear’s Bend. In the wild life that followed, I knew but one controlling feeling—love for the child that had been thrown upon my care—the child I had deprived of its natural guardians. No father’s love ever equaled in depth the remorseful tenderness I felt for this child of my murdered Madeleine. My ambition centered in her. I determined to take her back to the civilized States—to educate and accomplish her—to make amends for the wrong I had done her. But, to do this, I must have money; and while I schemed to make it, and thought her a mere child, she married—married into a family that was not only obscure but despised. Bitter disappointment was mine. Then, after a time, I began to plan how to take her away from the man she had married—to carry her off with me somewhere, for the spirit of restlessness possessed me. I had not forgotten my

revenge—it smoldered in my breast; suddenly it was fanned into a flame.

“One night, as I approached the cabin of Neil Griffin, I heard a voice inside—a voice I remembered too well. I stopped without, at the window, and my heart ceased beating when I saw him sitting within—my arch-enemy, the destroyer of my parents, the wrecker of my peace, the villain who had made me a murderer and an outcast—Marmaduke Archer! He was seated by the fire, excited by liquor, and ostentatiously displaying the treasure of gold, diamonds, and bank-notes which he carried concealed about his person. As I watched him, the blood burned in my brain. I clutched the knife at my belt. But I could not kill him there, under Milly’s roof. I postponed my vengeance until morning. Then I waylaid his path; I confronted him suddenly and bade him defend himself. He did so. He was no coward, and he was a man of powerful frame; but guilt unnerved him, and revenge gave me a tiger’s strength. At one time he had the advantage: he struck the knife from my hand after I had stabbed him once. He was about to plunge his own dirk into my heart, when I wrested it from him and dealt him his death-blow. That knife was the one produced in court as evidence against Neil Griffin. It was a silver-mounted, Spanish blade, which Neil had just given Archer in exchange for a ring. Here is the knife that struck the first blow—my own old bowie-knife, comrades, with my name cut in the handle and the blood of that villain rusted upon the blade. It was found in the hollow of ‘Gallows Oak,’ where I thrust it, with the bloody fragments of the vest I had ripped up to get at the bank-notes and diamonds. I had a right to them.

Did he not cheat my father of his fortune, and Madeleine of hers? As I turned around from hurriedly hiding the knife and vest, Neil Griffin came upon me. While he stood speechless with horror, I ran by him, crying, 'Keep silent, for Milly's sake!' Poor wretch! He did keep silent, even unto death. He would not betray me, even when he saw them bent upon hanging him for the murder.

"'Better me than you, Cap'n,' he whispered to me. 'You can do a better part by her than I can, and she'd feel worse to have you swing than to have me. Maybe it 'ud be a piece of good fortune for her if I was put out of the way.'

"I thought so too, perhaps; but God is my witness that I never meant he should die for me. I thought I could help him to escape that night. I meant to give him my good horse and a part of the gold, and have him fly to Mexico and leave Milly free. That was what I planned to do, but Fate ruled otherwise. The mob stole a march upon me. I risked rousing their suspicions by my effort to save him. I cried out that he was innocent. I cut him down before them—too late, as I had thought. That night my poor Milly's baby was born, while she lay convulsed and unconscious. The next night I resolved to steal away and destroy all trace of my flight. I set fire to the house and slipped away in a skiff at dead of night. If any flesh was found in the ashes of the burned building, it was that of a dog that was fastened up in the house; if any human bones were there, they were those of the Chief Wingino, whose skeleton I possessed. Milly knew nothing of our flight, nor of the journey that followed. Puerperal mania set in, and for months she had no intel-

ligent consciousness. When she recovered, I found that recollections of past events had faded from her mind, or were mixed up confusedly with her delirious visions. It was easy to make her believe that all was delirium—that she had never known other scenes than those now around her. After four years of schoolgirl life, she entered society. When she married Mr. Avery, she retained no recollection of her Western life, unless it was some fragmentary, dream-like glimpses; but she came here, and the sight of familiar scenes and of one well-known face started old recollections out upon the scroll of her mind as heat brings out invisible writing. She thought it was insanity. She wrote to me in agonized suspense, imploring me to tell her if she was mad, or if these memories were true. I told her not all, but all I dared to tell, and exacted from her a solemn promise that she would reveal it to no one—especially that she should not betray me and herself to Mr. Avery. She has kept that promise, though it has cost her dearly.

“She discovered after a time that Neil Griffin yet lived—that he was hunted down by Archer’s son, who sought revenge for his father’s murder. Believing him innocent, she did all she could to protect him from discovery. She encouraged Archer to confide to her his plans of detection, and she used her woman’s wit to thwart them. When all was in vain, she made one last attempt to save Neil, and rode at midnight to his cabin to carry him a horse on which to escape. For this brave deed she brought foul scandal on her head. She is wholly innocent. She never even discovered herself to Neil Griffin. He knows who she is now for the first time, as he stands here and listens to me. She is the wife he mourned as

dead. I tried to take her from him, but Fate is stronger than man. Fate has brought it all round its own way. It was the sudden sight of that blood-rusted old knife and those bloody fragments of the snake-skin vest that did for me. A sudden recollection of the old man's dying look smote me like a blow on the brain; and the sight of Neil Griffin's eyes to-day, as he sat on his coffin on his way to suffer death for my deed, was too much for me. It shocked me back to sense and feeling, and brought me here to confess that the crime was mine. No, I will not call it crime. It was no criminal deed to take the life of that villain."

"And you done it in fair fight, Cap'n—blow for blow," sang out the stentorian voice of Tom Reed. "Why didn't you say so then, like a man, an' all would 'a' been square?"

"All's square as it is, to my mind," shouted another voice. "I'll be blowed if as good a soljer as the Cap'n's got any business hangin' from a rope while there's fightin' to be did! No, sir; not while the red devils are a-thiev-in' and burnin' and scalpin', not far off, in the teeth of the President and the blue-coats. Come down from thar, Cap'n! Git your old rifle and let's be off where game's better, and there's more elbow-room."

Other voices took up the cry, and shouted:

"Yes, come down, Cap'n; we'll stand by you."
 "Long live Cap'n Brown!" "Let bygones be bygones."
 "'Twarn't no murder, anyway."

But when the Captain's story was done, his strength had seemed suddenly to forsake him. His head had dropped upon his breast; his tall form, that had stood erect while he spoke, drooped over the staff he held.

"No murder!" he murmured. "I tell you there's ghosts started up this day that will never be laid any more. I can see his dying look—I can hear his last groan! And that other—poor little Milly's father!—and my Madeleine, my murdered Madeleine!—both dead by my hand! Oh, God! she will hate me, now that she knows me to be the murderer of her father—the destroyer of her mother. She will never forgive me! She will hate my memory! Murder! yes, it was mur—"

His voice failed, he tottered and fell back into the arms of the sheriff. It was only a momentary unconsciousness; he opened his eyes and called faintly:

"Milly!"

She was kneeling by him, chafing one of his hands. He looked at her with unutterable anguish in his eyes.

"Your hate is bitterer than all to bear, Milly—bitterer than death—even death on the gallows."

She answered by leaning over and kissing him.

"You do not shrink from me," he murmured. "You can forgive the wrong I have done you?"

"Do not talk of forgiveness, my father. Let God forgive. I can only love you because you have loved me. The wrong you speak of is a shadow to me; your love is a reality. You have loved me—you have been kind to me always."

She pressed his hand to her cheek and to her lips.

"Oh, Heaven!" she cried, "how cold he is, and how feeble! He must be taken away from this place. It is fearful! Hear the noise of the crowd! See how they are pressing around the scaffold, their eyes fixed upon it—fixed upon him! Oh! pray let him be taken down and put into the carriage."

“Ay, that he shall be this minute!” cried Dick Allan, who had mounted to the top of the scaffold with great bounds that made it quiver. “He’s no business up here. Feelin’s will drive the best of men into scrapes sometimes. Cap’n Brown’s a *man*, and he’s no business swinging from a rope like a cat that’s been caught in a cupboard. No, not while the world’s as wide as it is, and there’s miles of blue prairie and green woods over yonder a leetle nearer to the settin’ sun. Here, bear a hand, friend, and we’ll have him down from this and into his carriage. But first let me cut *him* loose,” he continued, as his eye fell upon Neil Griffin.—“Manch, my boy, you’ll never untie them cords with your eyes full o’ salt water. Let me give ’em a slash with my old dirk. There!—Here, shake hands with me, man! I’m proud to see you free. You’ve showed a stout heart, Neil Griffin—a stout heart and a brave one, by gum! I’ll say that for you, if they do say your father was a renegade, and your mother a witch. I don’t know where you got it from, but you’re a hero. Show me another man that would ’a’ faced the gallows twice afore he’d betray his friend! But there was love and a woman at the bottom of it. Well, you’ve earnt her, boy, and no mistake; yes, you’ve earnt her, and you shall have her, if she’s willin’ to go, if the President hisself laid claim to her for a wife. You stand there a free man now—a free man and a happy one!”

“Free and happy!” Did not the words seem irony to the man who stood there pale and stunned, with a look of bewilderment on his face? He clung to Manch’s hand and looked down drearily.

He felt a light touch upon his arm.

“Look, Ishmael!—it’s *her!*” said Manch. “She’s holding out her hand to you.”

It was Melicent who had touched him. Still kneeling by the prostrate form of the man she had known as her father, she held out her hand to the husband of her youth, with no word upon her tremulous lips, but with a look full of deepest gratitude, sympathy, and kindness. His heart beat tumultuously as he held the slender hand an instant in his trembling clasp. Old memories crowded upon him—long-silent accents thrilled upon his ear. Her voice recalled his wandering senses.

“Help me persuade him to leave this place,” she said.

For Captain Brown—or Judge Weir, as we may call him—refused to be taken down from the scaffold. He lay upon the floor, supported now by the stalwart arms of Dick Allan. The sheriff had gone below, and his place upon the platform was filled by old Hagar Griffin. She stood over the fallen man like an eagle over its prey, but her fierce eye softened as she saw his condition. She had been his bitter foe in days gone by, but she had always admired his prowess and daring. His last act of saving Neil by his voluntary confession wiped out for her many of the old scores against him, and to her half-savage judgment there was nothing so dark in the passion-stained record he had given of his life. Revenge was a portion of her creed, and she was ready to shake hands with the fallen chief in his hate for Marmaduke Archer.

“I’ll bear a hand, Dick, and we’ll help him to get down from this before they have a noose around *his* neck—they’re so fond of tying the hemp cravat. God grant I may see it twisted around some of their own throats yet

before I die—the sneaking foxes! Come, Captain—can you help yourself a bit?”

But the “Captain” motioned them aside.

“No,” he said feebly; “I am a dying man, and *here* is the right place for me to die. Here is where I ought to have stood eight years ago, but I had not the courage to face the shame of such a death, and I could not bear to leave Milly.—Come close to me, my darling. I’ve wronged you, but I loved you for all that; and I’m dying, Milly.”

“Not dying, my father! You were so much better just now.”

“It was dying strength; it was the flash before the fire went out. It was given me to make some amends—at this late day—for the wrongs done to him and you. Poor girl! I have wronged you out of father and mother—out of husband and child.”

“Child, father! What can you mean?”

“Your little babe, Melicent. That night—the night I burned the house—I left it. It’s little pitiful face has haunted me so! The thought troubles me now.”

“My poor little babe was dead, father. It had never drawn breath. If it was burned up in the house, it could not feel the flames. Don’t let that trouble you now.”

“It was not dead—it was not burned.”

“Not dead? Merciful God! where is it? Oh, father, tell me! Speak to me!”

He looked at her without seeming to comprehend. His eyes took on the dull, vacant look they had worn before; his lips moved in vague muttering. Melicent bent over him until her breath mixed with his.

“Will you not tell me what you did with my child, father?” she whispered imploringly. “You said you left it that night we went from the burning house? Where did you leave it, father?”

“It was—yes, I left him at her door.”

“Whose door, father?”

“Hagar Griffin’s—his grandmother’s.”

Melicent’s swift glance went over first to the amazed face of old Hagar, who leaned opposite, and then to that of Manch. The old dame nodded eagerly.

“That’s him!” she cried, pointing to Manch. “Harriet found him at our door that night, wrapped in a blanket. I never once mistrusted whose child it was; but he had the Griffin eye, and folks swore he was Harriet’s child—the slandering devils!”

The dying man roused from his fitful stupor, groaned, and looked around for Melicent.

“If I could know the child lived,” he murmured, the gleam of intelligence momentarily lighting his eye.

“Father, he lives!” cried Melicent, her voice trembling with unutterable feeling. “It is Manch—little Manch you liked so much. He lives—he is here!”

She turned her eyes, shining through tears, upon the boy.

“My child!” she cried, and caught him to her bosom, clasping him in a passionate embrace and sobbing over him in wordless emotion.

Suddenly, she felt his arms relax and drop from her neck. She gazed with dismay at his wan face and pale, parted lips.

“My God!” she exclaimed. “Have I found him only to lose him?”

“Give him to me,” said a gentle voice at her side. “He has only fainted.”

Neil took his boy in his arms, chafed his hands and forehead a moment, and then the child drew a sobbing breath and opened his eyes—opened them to meet the tender, loving ones of the friend to whom he had been so faithful.

“My father!” he uttered; and clasping his arms around Neil’s neck, he buried his face in his bosom.

The sore-tried and long-suffering man felt at that moment a thrill of unalloyed joy.

As the eyes of the man who had injured him so deeply fell upon this moving picture, a shadow of agony passed over his face.

“It is I who have so long deprived him of a father’s happiness,” was perhaps the old man’s remorseful thought at that moment. Or it might have been bodily pain that convulsed his features, for his eyes had grown vacant and glazed again. They moved round once, twice, as if in vague search for something they, knew not what. Then they fell upon the face of Dick Allan, bent over his old comrade, and full of rugged sympathy. A sudden blaze leaped up in the dying eyes; he threw up his hand, as though it held a battle-blade, and cried in his old, thrilling tones:

“Come, boys—follow me!”

The ruling instinct was strong in death. The raised arm dropped heavily, the fire died out in the glazing eyes, the firm mouth quivered, a fearful tumult convulsed the majestic brow one moment—and then passed; and he lay in death, calm and grand as the sculptured form of the Roman Cæsar.

The authority of the mayor and his corps had been needed to restrain the crowd while this strange scene was passing upon the platform of the gallows. Now their pent-up excitement broke bounds, and they pressed around the scaffold and gave vent to shouts and curses, and seemed ready to shake the platform from its foundation in their eagerness to obtain a sight of the actors in the wild drama whose last scene had just closed on the floor of a gallows. Disappointed in the promised entertainment of a hanging, they were determined not to be deprived of the tragic spectacle which they were compelled to accept as its substitute; and while Melicent sobbed over the lifeless form of her foster-father, and Dr. Wilson, after a brief examination of the body, went down to testify to the old man's decease, the crowd surged against the platform and inveighed against the authorities who requested them to keep back.

Mr. Avery had not lived so long among these wild Western men without knowing the one way there was to deal with them. Springing upon the steps of the scaffold, he drew a revolver from his belt and coolly declared himself ready to fire upon the first one who should approach within a yard of the scaffold unless summoned to render assistance. Then he called upon the sheriff and two others to bring down the body of Judge Weir.

"Hold, one moment," he said, as they were about to ascend the platform. He replaced the revolver in his belt, and his face underwent a change as he turned and approached where Melicent knelt. As he had stood below and listened to the wild story of confession and explanation which freed Melicent from blame and revealed the sad trials she had passed through, his soul had been

stirred by the succession of stormy feelings that had swept across it—astonishment, remorse, pity, love, anguish. Now, as he leaned over Melicent, his cheek was pale and his eye full of tenderness and compassion.

“Come with me, Melicent,” he said gently; “you are not needed here any longer; you can do him no more good, and I will see to the removal of the body. Come, let me put you in the carriage and have you driven home.”

The hand he laid upon Melicent’s arm was struck off suddenly, and the bony fingers of old Hagar Griffin grasped his shoulder and thrust him aside.

“She’ll never go to a home of yours!” she cried. “My son’s wife goes to *his* own home. Yonder is the death-cart that brought him here to the gallows, and that was meant to carry back his murdered remains. But God has shown himself above the devil to-day, and that same cart shall take back my living son and his wife; and the coffin that was meant for him shall hold the body of the man who wronged them both and repented of it. You have nothing more to do with us. We will bury our dead, and shed our tears, and rejoice over our found without your interference. Go and find a bride somewhere else, Alexander Avery; you have no claim upon Neil Griffin’s lawful wife.”

She waved him down with a stern, imperative gesture, and stepped between him and Melicent. But their eyes had met, and a look had passed between them that would never be forgotten by either. And there was another who would remember it to the hour of his death. Neil Griffin had seen the look of yearning devotion upon one side, of anguish and tender forgiveness upon the other.

The body of Judge Weir was lifted and borne to the

death-cart that had brought Neil Griffin to the gallows. As the men were about to place it in the cart, a tall, pale gentleman came up and spread upon the floor of the rough vehicle the handsome cloak he had just taken from his shoulders. Stepping to a carriage near by, he took a damask cushion from the seat and placed it also in the cart. Then he signed to the bearers to lay their burden down upon these. The same thin, pale gentleman then spoke to Hagar and offered her his carriage to take herself and Melicent home.

“She could not ride in that thing with the coffin and the dead body,” he said, with a movement of his shoulders, half shudder, half shrug, and Melicent recognized in the thin, closely-shaved gentleman Colonel Archer, changed by the fever that followed his wound, and still something of an invalid. Probably Hagar did not know him as the “spy” whom she had execrated so often.

At first she declined to accept his offer of the carriage. The way was short, and she preferred to walk; but she saw that Melicent was hardly able to stand. Melicent must ride, and it did seem hard for her to go in the death-cart with the coffin and a corpse in it. So, for once, she overcame her savage independence and accepted the carriage for the sake of Melicent, who, exhausted and half fainting, hardly heard a word of what was being said. She only looked to see that the body in the cart was carefully disposed, with Neil seated beside it, and then suffered herself to be led to the carriage and helped to a seat in its shaded recess.

As he closed the door, Colonel Archer lingered an instant, looking compassionately at her white face and sorrowful eyes.

"I deeply regret having been the cause of adding to your unhappiness, dear lady," he said. "I shall feel remorse whenever I think of that sad face of yours. I would to God I had never stirred in this dreadful business, but had left revenge to the Great Avenger, as you prayed me to do! I have done myself no good, and have brought much trouble upon others. It will make me a better man, I think. Will you shake hands with me, Melicent, and say that you will try to forgive me?"

Her lips moved to murmur the word "forgive," and she laid her little, wan hand in his. He pressed it warmly.

"If you ever need a friend, Melicent, I entreat you to believe in the brother's interest I feel for you, and give me a chance to redeem myself in your eyes."

Then the carriage drove rapidly away, and soon set Melicent down at her new home. Melicent, the beautiful, the refined, the accomplished, at the "Wildcat's Den," the companion of Mad Hagar and poor, half-witted Harriet! What a change! What a contrast between her former beautiful homes and the rough log cottage she was now to occupy!

But Melicent hardly thought of the change in her outward surroundings. Old Hagar's strong arms lifted her from the carriage as tenderly as though she had been an infant, and half supported her along the graveled walk, past Harriet's tiny, sweet-smelling garden, and into Harriet's own clean little room, where, laid upon the fresh white bed, with Harriet to bathe her face, and kiss and wonder delightedly over the little, white, ringed hands, she fell into the deep sleep of weariness and exhaustion.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE funeral was over ; the earth had received into its all-embracing bosom what remained of the proud, passionate man who had sinned and suffered punishment from the hands of God, if not of man. No thought of reproach or of accusation crossed Melicent's mind as she looked for the last time on the majestic face—nothing but grief and love. As she stood under the gray-clouded sky in the misty rain and watched the body lowered into the earth, a feeling of desolation came over her—a wild longing to lay her head, tired and giddy with the tossings of fate, upon that same calm resting-place. But she felt the sympathetic clasp of Manch's little fingers upon her own, and she looked down and gathered strength to live from the loving eyes of her child. Her child ! There was sweet, pure comfort in the outflowing of this fountain of maternal love that had been newly unsealed in her breast. At that moment it strengthened her to meet a look that might have had power to unnerve her, it was so full of passionate sympathy—of tender compassion ; for Mr. Avery stood opposite to her on the other side of the grave, with folded arms and pale, troubled face. He did not speak to her himself, but she saw him put his umbrella into the hands of the gray-haired minister and say a few words to him in an undertone ; and when the reverend gentleman came to her side with a respectful greeting and held over her an umbrella to shield her from the fine, misty rain she was scarcely conscious was falling, she knew by whom the kindly act was prompted. It was not the only proof she had of Mr. Avery's interest. He had superin-

tended all the arrangements for the burial, and had sent the plain but handsome coffin that received the body, and the hearse that bore it to the grave. He also sent the carriage that conveyed Melicent to the funeral.

Old Hagar had bitterly resented what she called the interference of the meddling, high-headed mayor; but Neil's quiet determination overcame her vehemence, and the coffin was brought in. He had seen that it was the wish of Melicent. He refused to send back the carriage as his mother insisted should be done, and she cried angrily:

"Are you the fool to let her ride in a carriage *he* has sent!"

Neil answered gently:

"We have none for her to go in, and she is not able to walk. I think it would hurt Mr. Avery's feelings to refuse it. It was thoughtful and kind of him."

He did not know that Melicent was near until she stepped upon the porch from the doorway where she had been standing and thanked him by a look. That look, kind as it was, sent a pang to his heart. He felt she was grateful for his praise of Mr. Avery.

Three days had passed since the funeral. Melicent had received a formal note from Mr. Avery, asking what disposition she wished to make of her furniture and other property that remained at his house. Did she want it sent to her present abode? If so, she would please let him know. She answered in the same business way, requesting him to let the furniture be taken to the auction-rooms, and to send her only the trunks in which were already packed her clothes, books, and some of her girl-
ish keepsakes. A few hours later these trunks were

brought, and with them came two others, filled with all the gifts she had received from Mr. Avery during their married life—books, toilet articles, and elegant souvenirs, among them a beautiful watch, an ormolu dressing-case, work-box, and writing-desk.

Melicent permitted Harriet to have the rare delight of examining and unpacking the things. Down upon her knees by the open trunks, the girl unwrapped paper parcels and peered into boxes and caskets, uttering little childish cries of admiration over each beautiful object, and holding it up for inspection, with her black eyes dancing and her curly hair quivering with delight.

Neil was seated near, carving a toy ship for Manch, who sat at his side. Melicent's eyes were bent upon a book, whose pages she turned too fast for any coherent reading. Was she afraid to trust herself to look at these souvenirs lest they should speak too eloquently of the one who gave them?

At length Harriet came upon a small, silver-inlaid, ebony casket that contained some pieces of jewelry—presents from Mr. Avery, which Melicent had not seen since she placed them in his trunk when she left his house to return to her father. Harriet lifted out a tiny, elegant chain, to which was attached a small enameled locket

“May I open it?” asked she; and, before an answer could be given, the spring gave way and the case fell open in her hands.

“Oh! what a grand gentleman! Why, it's the mayor himself—the mayor that Pretty Lady used to ride with. What a beautiful mouth—sweet enough for a queen to kiss!—and all smilin'; not solemn and grumptions as he

looked t'other day. Pretty Lady, why don't you make him smile like he used to? Why don't you ride with him some more in his grand carriage, and wear his picture around your neck?"

She held up the miniature to Melicent and made a motion of throwing the chain around her neck. But Melicent put back the hand that held the picture with a quick, agitated gesture.

"Take it away, Harriet; put it up, please," she said. "This casket must go back, and many of the other things."

"Oh! will you send them back—all your pretty things? And your rings, too, with the writin' inside of them? You took 'em off last night; I saw you cryin' when you put 'em in the little box, and you kissed the plain one before you laid it away—"

"Oh, Harriet!" exclaimed Melicent, deeply distressed, for she knew that Neil's eyes were upon her, and she felt the blood surge to her brow.

"Have I vexed you, Pretty Lady?" asked the simple creature, turning round on her knees, taking Melicent's hands and patting and kissing them. "I won't hurt the things, and I will put them all back so nice."

"Very well, my dear," said Melicent, controlling herself and speaking gently as she rose and went away.

"Father," said Manch, "you have cut off the figure-head."

"Have I? Yes, I see. I wasn't thinking. Well, the ship's spoiled, but I'll make you another this evening. My head aches now, and I'll try a little walk."

He went out. He walked slowly down the hill to the bayou—to the old ash, on whose great, gnarled roots he

and his Milly had sat and fished in the summer days he used to love to recall. Their memory had been sweet, if sad, unmarred by any shadow save the tender one of regret. Then her spirit had seemed to hover about him—to be very near in dreams; and in those moods, that were half dream and half memory, nothing but a breath had seemed to divide them. But now a gulf more deep than death appeared to yawn between them. Living, yet lost to him! More and more, as he looked at and listened to her, did she come back in the likeness of the Milly that had been his, and more and more did the desolate aching in his heart increase as he felt that she could never be his Milly again.

“Free and happy!” Dick Allan’s words had seemed a mockery to him, even then in the hour of his deliverance from death. He had no faith in the promised happiness. He did not rebel against Fate; he did not complain of his lot, or question its justice; he was not cynical or repining; but he had an instinctive doubt that any sun would shine into his life.

And the instinct, it seemed, would prove prophetic. The freedom was not complete; it had come too late. The years of fugitive life, of watchfulness, suspicion, and haunting fear, had left their traces on his mind more indelibly than the marks of the chain-links upon his limbs. Every footfall startled him as though it was the tread of a pursuer; he looked wildly into every face that passed; he shrank from every strange voice or touch; he hid himself from the visitors that came to congratulate him upon his deliverance—some coming from curiosity, and a few out of admiration for the self-abnegating spirit he had shown. These last were very few. There were few who could

understand or appreciate such a crucifixion of self through devotion to another. "A poor simpleton." "A crack-brained fellow." "A spiritless dolt." These epithets were bestowed upon him by the many, and they marked the light in which his self-immolation was regarded. He himself did not see it in any heroic light. It had seemed to him a simple duty that he should shield Milly's father in the first instance, since he had a sad, unexpressed conviction that she loved her father better and would grieve more for his loss; and he had also a humble belief that her father could do more to make her happy and advance her socially than he could do.

When he was taken up and condemned the last time, his silence was due partly to his knowledge that, if he should speak now and denounce the real murderer, he would not be believed. It would be regarded as a lame invention, since there was no proof to corroborate his assertion, and the man he would have accused was supposed to have been dead for eight years. This was partly the reason of his silence, but not altogether. There were still more subtle motives: reverence for the memory of his lost wife; the long habit of keeping her father's secret as a sacred homage to her—as a kind of sacrifice upon her shrine; the feeling of the pilgrim who pours an offering of his own blood upon the shrine of his saint.

These were among the less tangible influences that induced the silence of this man, whose nature, though simple, was fine and sensitive. And because his nature was so fine and sensitive, the fugitive feeling of years had worn into it as the links of a chain into the more material flesh, until his present freedom from fear and pursuit was half a mockery.

“Free and happy!” The words rang derisively in his ears as he sat on the gnarled roots of the well-remembered ash-tree, with the red, rain-swollen bayou murmuring hoarsely at his feet. He had been shown a glimpse of happiness to mock him, and it had vanished like his dreams of joy. He had been shown his Milly—alive and well, more beautiful than before; and the next flash of the magic lantern had revealed her no longer his. She had drifted a long way off from him—farther off, it seemed, than when he thought her in heaven.

With the trunks that came for Melicent, there had arrived also several articles of furniture—presents to her from Mr. Avery in the early weeks of their marriage. There were a fauteuil, a handsomely carved sewing-chair, a unique little chest of drawers, and two exquisite inlaid tables.

Partly to divert her mind by employment, and partly through a woman’s natural taste for neatness and craving for home occupations, Melicent undertook to “put to rights” the little room which she shared with Harriet, and to arrange in it a portion of the newly arrived furniture, and some of the ornaments and elegant trifles that Harriet had unpacked from the boxes. There was a large window at one end of the room, greatly disproportioned to the size of the apartment; but Hagar had had the smaller window enlarged and suitably glazed to please her gentle, simple-minded daughter, to whom she was very indulgent, notwithstanding her manner to her was outwardly harsh. The girl made this window her beloved resort, in winter and in summer. She put her flowers in its low, deep ledge, and trained a honeysuckle over it in a thick, beautiful arch. Melicent delighted

her by draping the window with curtains of a rich green color with a raised arabesque design. The two then put one of the pretty tables near it, on which was set Melicent's inlaid work-box. They then proceeded to set up the chest of drawers and decorate it with the elegant little toilet set of Sèvres china. They hung some of the pictures upon the walls, ornamented the mantel-piece with an alabaster vase of flowers, and ranged the books and pretty knickknacks upon the shelves and mantel-piece, and wherever there was a place for them.

"You've put your prettiest pictures here to one side, and these little white figures that look so sweet, and the other vase, and your nicest counterpane and pillow-cases. Pretty Lady, what made you do that?"

"I will tell you," said Melicent. "They are for Neil and Manch. They like pretty things as well as we do, and their poor little room is so bare. Do you know what we can do while they are away fishing? We can carry these things over to their room and fix it up so nice they will think the fairies have been at work upon it."

Harriet assented with alacrity. She was willing to do any service for the "Pretty Lady," whom she worshiped as something more than mortal. She gathered up her arms full of things, and followed Melicent to the little one-roomed out-house which Neil and Manch occupied. It was neat, but very bare. A bed, a wash-stand, and two chairs were all the furniture it contained.

"Now, let us go briskly to work and change the looks of things," said Melicent to her willing handmaid.

To work they went, and in an hour feminine ingenuity and taste had transformed the cheerless room into a pretty chamber, made fresh and bright-looking by the

neat curtains hung at the windows and draped back with blue ribbons ; by the snowy Marseilles counterpane covering the bed, the bright rug laid down before the hearth, the small but choice pictures hung upon the wall, and the handsome chair and beautiful little table which Harriet had brought over at Melicent's suggestion. To give the finishing touch of brightness to the little room, Melicent arranged a vase full of Harriet's prettiest flowers and set it upon the table.

Melicent had taken more pleasure in these simple arrangements for Neil's comfort than she had found in any occupation for many days. She smiled almost joyously as she listened to Harriet's delighted exclamations.

"Won't Neil think it's grand? And won't Manch sleep like a bird in its nest when he lies in this nice bed? Pretty Lady, I'll run down in the field and bring mammy and Gabe to look at it?"

"No, no. They will be coming home presently. See, the shadows are growing long. Bring out your knitting and let us go and sit on the porch yonder. I will get the book with the pictures and show them to you, and read you the story I promised."

And when Neil and Manch came home with their fish, they saw Harriet sitting at Melicent's feet, the knitting dropped in her lap, and her large, deer-like eyes fastened intently on Melicent, who was reading aloud a fascinating fairy story, illustrated by colored pictures, which, being explained by Melicent as she read, were a great help to the girl's slender understanding. It is likely she was as much charmed by Melicent as by the story—by the music of her voice and the graceful fall of her hair, and the beauty of her white throat encircled by its deli-

cate ruffle—all of which the girl, who had a passionate enjoyment of beauty, noted with the rapturous admiration of a lover.

“How sweet she is!” said Manch, looking at Melicent’s lovely figure, framed in the vine-arch of the little porch. “And to think that she is my mother!—a lady like her! I can’t make it real to me somehow. I look at her, and look at her, and she seems far off and above me, though she’s sweet and kind to me as can be. You understand, father—don’t you?”

Neil nodded in silence. He could not have spoken just then. He knew the feeling in all its bitterness.

“Seems to me she ought to ‘a’ had a nicer chap for a son—one of them fair-faced, book-learned fellows with shiny hair, what can read off outlandish lingo like a top, and’s got g’ography and figgers at their tongue’s end. I wish I wasn’t sunburnt and my hair wasn’t so unruly, and I could read my new ‘Robinson Crusoe’ without a bobble. But I’ll learn yet; I’ll do my best to please her, and maybe some day she won’t be ashamed of me. She says she isn’t now—and she likes me, I know she does. She likes you too, father; I see her brushing your coat so careful the other day, when you left it off, and she told me I must be loving and good to you always, for you were noble and true; them were her words—noble and true.”

As he prattled on in this fashion, he was helping his father spread his cast-net upon a clump of myrtle-bushes to dry.

Then, turning to the well close by, he whirled the windlass briskly, and bringing up a bucket of cool water, poured it over the fish that Neil had turned out from the

bag into the tub placed under the well-spout. Another bucket of water filled to brimming the white, scoured pail that hung under the well-shed, and, taking this in his hand, Manch went on to his little domicile, saying to Neil:

“We’ll wash off some of this dust, and then go yonder and get mother to play the guitar for us.”

As he entered the house, he stopped, looked around, set down his pail, and stared about again in wonder. Then he beckoned to Neil, who was just coming up.

“Here’s Aladdin been here with his lamp since we went away,” he said. “Just look around! How nice! Ain’t that bed beautiful? And that flower-pot and the pictures? It’s all *her* work, father; she’s the fairy that did it. Here’s the red ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ full of pictures, and here’s a footstool she worked with her own fingers. She likes us—don’t you see? I told you she did.”

He did not fully understand why it was that a painful emotion quivered across Neil’s face as he looked around a moment, and then, leaning his head on the mantel-board, stifled a sigh.

“She pities me,” he thought. “She can not love me, and she wishes to make it up by kindness.”

In a moment he had crushed the selfish pang and raised his head.

“She has taken her pretty things to fix us up, Manch, and we rough fellows can do without them, can’t we?” he said cheerfully.

“But if she likes to let us have them, father?”

“Ah! well, if she *likes* it, we’ll do the same and thank her for being so good.”

A few moments afterward the two, neatly washed and combed, joined Melicent and Harriet in the porch and thanked them for the transformation wrought in their little sleeping-room—Manch with boyish enthusiasm, and Neil with his habitual, sweet earnestness, dashed with the shyness of look and the flitting color that marked his present intercourse with Melicent. She herself was moved by conflicting feelings whenever she met the wistful look of those large, gentle eyes. Tender interest and compassionate regard were the feelings she entertained for him. Something in his eyes seemed to crave but not expect more, and that look smote her with self-reproach. Both of them avoided all mention of the past. Melicent took notice that he had never called her name, and neither had ever made an allusion to the days when they were all in all to each other; but she felt that they must be strong in his memory at this moment, as he sat down near her and looked at her sitting in a simple, home-like dress on the rough porch of his mother's house.

To cover her embarrassment, she remarked playfully to Manch:

“If I had had a bracket, I would have put your favorite saint—old Santa Claus, you know—at the head of your bed, Manch. I have him here, as jolly as ever, you see,” taking an image of the rotund, jovial old saint out of her work-box and holding it up. “If I had a bracket, I would set him up where he could smile at you as you slept.”

“Why, Ishmael—father, I mean—can carve beautiful brackets out of cedar cigar-boxes and thin slabs of mahogany and walnut and such like. Many a basket full of brackets I’ve sold for him—haven’t I, father? I’ll bring

you a piece of cedar and let you begin to whittle now, while Harriet gets the guitar for mother to play a little for us, before I go to scale the fine mess of fish we're to have for supper."

It was a pretty, home-like picture that was to be seen on Hagar's porch a little while afterward, as the sunset slanted through the oak-boughs, and the humming-birds darted about among the late jasmines in Harriet's garden. Melicent was the central figure, with her guitar upon her lap, her slender hand playing with its strings, the breeze lifting the light curls on her forehead, and her eyes cast down, resting upon Manch, who sat at her feet with his head leaning against her and his heart swelling with love for his newly found mother. On the other side of her, Harriet was sitting on her low stool, rapturously absorbed in the music, and unconsciously keeping time to it, by nodding her head and disheveling the short black locks that Melicent had just smoothly curled.

Neil, with the piece of wood for the bracket-carving in his hand, watched the group and listened to the music until his eyes filled with tears.

How much she looked like Milly in that simple dress and with the simply arranged hair! If he only dared ask her for one of those old songs they used to love to sing together—"The Willow-Tree," or "Come, my Love, with Me!" The request was trembling on his lips, when Manch, who had opened the music-book that lay closed on a chair before her, pointed to a song and begged that she would sing it.

She complied, but faltered and paused, and seemed to regret having begun it. They urged her to continue, and she went on until she came to the last verse:

“There comes no answer to my heart—
Memory and hope are vain ;
I only know we live apart,
And dare not love again.”

Here her voice broke into husky tones and her bosom heaved with stifled feeling. She rose hastily and went into her room. Manch glanced at Neil, and saw that he looked distressed. Harriet rose to follow Melicent, but Neil gently restrained her.

“She would rather be alone,” he said.

Then he walked off with the slow, listless step that tells of a burdened heart.

At this moment a horseman rode up to the gate, dismounted, and came toward them. The firm step, the tall figure, the graceful bearing, were easily recognized. It was Mr. Avery. He lifted his hat to Hagar, who had come in from the field and was standing on the porch.

“I wish to see Melicent,” he said. “Is she here?”

The old dame eyed him with a glance of dislike and suspicion.

“What do you want with *her*?” she asked at last. “You’ve got nothing to do with my son’s wife. She don’t belong with you nor with your set.”

“I have something to deliver to her.”

“Give it to me. I’ll put it in her hands.”

“No, madam,” returned Mr. Avery with firm dignity ; “I prefer to speak to her myself. I have money from the sale of her furniture, which I wish to pay over into her hands and take her receipt for it. It is a matter of business.”

That word “business” is a potent talisman. It is allowed many privileges. It opens the most jealously

guarded doors and intrudes into the sacreddest privacy. It had its effect even upon Hagar. She hesitated an instant, and then reluctantly waved her hand for the unwelcome visitor to go in—indicating the door of Melicent's room. He went up to it and knocked softly. Receiving no answer, he turned the handle of the door and entered. She stood at the window, her face averted from the door. She thought the intruder was Harriet, and did not look around until he softly called her name. At the sound of his voice she turned quickly around. His unexpected presence at that moment of weakness and emotion overcame her. She made a step forward and faltered, trembling in every limb. He caught her wavering figure in his arms and held her an instant close to his breast, looking down into her face with passionate earnestness. Then, as the color flowed to her cheeks and she opened her eyes, he silently placed her in her chair by the window and seated himself beside her.

“Why did you come?” she asked reproachfully.

“Why did I come? Have I no heart? Have I no desire to know concerning the welfare of one who was so lately my wife—my own—who is still my idol?”

Then, commanding himself, he added more calmly:

“I came to bring your money, Melicent. The furniture has been sold.”

He laid a thick roll of bank-bills upon the table.

“That seems a much larger amount than I had any right to expect,” she said. “Will you tell me who purchased the furniture?”

“I did, Melicent. Did you think I would let it go out of my possession—every piece of it made sacred by your touch?”

“Mr. Avery, I can not take any more than the furniture is worth. I am already too deeply under obligations—”

“Do not talk to me of obligations, Melicent. As for the money, take it, and assure yourself it is no more than the furniture was worth. I dared not offer you more. I knew you were offended with me, and rightly, for my unjust suspicions, my cruel coldness toward you. I knew you could not forgive me—”

“I have freely, fully forgiven you, Aleck.”

“Ah! that is kind and sweet of you, dearest—more than I deserve. But you do not know how terribly I was tempted—how torn my heart was with jealousy. And now, when all doubt is cleared away—when I know your truth and purity, never to doubt them again—when I understand the trials you have gone through—now, I can not console you, can not make amends for the past by my greater love and care for your happiness. I am not even permitted to offer you the sympathy of a friend, for a mere friend I can never be to you, Melicent. So you are utterly lost to me—given up to another—and that other no mate for you, unworthy of you.”

“He is good, and noble, and true-hearted. I am not worthy of *him*.”

“May he always be kind to you, Melicent! I know he has acted a noble part, but he is not a fit husband for you—you, so refined in mind, in person.”

“He has the true refinement,” she said.

“He has displayed it certainly,” he returned bitterly. “He has shown it by claiming you with such indecent haste—by taking possession of you, as though you were a chattel, before you had time to crush and bury any feel-

ings that might stand between a reunion with him—before you had time to consult your own heart, that might have chosen a solitary life, at least for a time—”

“You mistake!” cried Melicent. “Oh! if you knew—if you knew what delicacy he has shown. He did not claim me. It was not he who brought me here. I came with his mother, hardly conscious where I went; but, indeed, where else was there for me to go?”

“What is it you say, Melicent?—he has not claimed you for his wife?”

“He has not spoken one word that could be construed into such a claim. He has not even touched my hand or called my name, or intruded himself upon me in any way.”

“And yet he loves you so, Melicent. To do what he has done, he must love you with devotion.”

“He does. Oh! I would to Heaven he did not,” she cried, with the tears rushing to her eyes. “Poor, faithful, tender heart!”

“Do you not love him, Melicent?”

“I think I could die to make him happy,” she answered.

“Then you love him, surely—do you not?”

She raised her eyes, suffused with tears, to his, that he might read her answer in their mournful depths.

“Alas!” she said, and bowed her face upon her hand.

He drew the hand gently away, carried it to his lips, and then held it closely clasped in his.

“You have taken off your rings, my dearest,” he said; “the pledge of our betrothal, as well as the marriage-ring. You wish to put away from you all reminders

of the relation that once was dear to you—that still is dear to me, Melicent?”

“It is best that there should be no reminders.”

“Then you will cast me off utterly?—you will give yourself to him, though there is no law that obliges you to do so? The law would give you your freedom if—”

“Is there no obligation higher than law?” she asked, rising and standing before him. “Is not duty above law, and gratitude above both? I should despise myself, I should be the veriest ingrate on earth, if I forsook him *now*, after all he has done and suffered because of me. I have blighted his life. I owe it to him, as the only reparation in my power, to honor and cherish him with wifely duty as long as his life shall last.”

“And you will do this, Melicent?”

“If he asks it of me,” she said, with gathering firmness. “This I have resolved upon; this is the only duty that seems clear to me in the future. And since I have resolved upon it, it is best that we do not meet again, Aleck. It can result in no good to us, and it can but give pain to him; and I must not cause him another pang that I can prevent.”

“Is this your final decision, Melicent?”

“It is. My conscience constrains me to abide by it.”

“It is well. I think you have never loved me truly, or you could not talk so calmly about conscience and gratitude, knowing to what desolation your words consign me. I will obey your wishes. I will not seek your presence again. Farewell!”

He clasped her cold hand an instant, let it fall, and, looking once at her trembling lips that could not trust themselves to speak, he turned from her and left the

room. Then she sank down where she stood, pressed her face upon the window-ledge, and let her restrained feelings find vent in a burst of passionate weeping. Presently some one knelt by her and softly put back the hair from her face, smoothing it with the gentlest touches as she whispered :

“Pretty Lady, don’t cry so. You’ll break my heart.”

There was a witness to the interview between Melicent and Mr. Avery. Outside, at the window which opened on the porch, stood Hagar eagerly peering through the half-parted curtains. As she looked, her face assumed a malignant expression, her eyes blazed fiercely, her bony hand clinched and trembled as it hung by her side. She heard a step behind her, and turning around, she saw Neil. She caught his arm and drew him to her forcibly.

“Look!” she cried, pointing to the space between the curtains.

Involuntarily, his eyes followed the direction of her finger. He saw the sight that had aroused her anger—Mr. Avery sitting near Melicent, bending over her, holding her hand in his, and gazing at her with impassioned fondness. He turned off, his face a shade whiter and more haggard.

“Come away, mother,” he said. “Don’t be spying her movements; it is an insult to her.”

“An insult to her! What makes it one? Isn’t she one of *us*? Haven’t you and I a right to see what she does? Why don’t you claim her? Why don’t you force her to own you as her husband, and dare him to come near her?”

“I would not force myself upon her for my right hand; I would not intrude on her feelings; I would not

impose myself upon her pity. No, no; don't ever speak to her that way—as if I had any claim upon her. Let things be as they are, mother.”

“But you love her,” retorted the old woman, with a keen glance into her son's face. “You'd die for her this minute—you soft-hearted fool!”

“I love her better than my own life,” he said sadly.

“And you shall have her in spite of him. What! because she has white hands and delicate ways, I suppose she's too good for you—too good to stay with us! My fine gentleman there tells her so, no doubt. He is the proper mate for her; he is the one to take her to his fine home, as David did the wife of Uriah. Let him take care; he'll find worse than a Nathan in his path. Look at him now,” she continued, turning to the window and glaring through the narrow space in between the curtains. “See how he looks at her; and she—I tell you, boy,” she exclaimed, suddenly wheeling round and grasping his arm, “she loves him.”

“I know it, mother.”

“And what will you do?”

“Do? I can do nothing but die. That is the only way to set things right and make her happy.”

“Die! yes, that's just you. You'll go off somewhere like a sick deer, and die, and leave her to him. I'd *kill* him first!”

“What good would that do? It would only break her heart.”

“She's broke yours.”

“She's not to blame for that. She could not help outgrowing the liking she had for me, when she was little Milly. She's grown since then—body and mind

too—and she's found a mate better suited to her. She's not to blame if she loves him. Wasn't he her husband? Hasn't her beautiful head lain on his bosom? She might be his now, and happy as the day's long in his home, if it wasn't for me. It's me that stands between her and happiness. Isn't it better for me to die?"

He pulled his hat down over his eyes, turned away from her, and went out of the house. She looked after him a moment, and her features grew set into an expression of hard determination.

"That shan't be," she muttered. "He shall have her; she shall live with him; she shall never leave this place. I'll see to that. And my fine gentleman had better look out."

Still muttering, she went out and made her way to the foot of the hill. There she waited by the roadside until Mr. Avery appeared. When he approached, she stepped out into the path before him and stopped him.

"Mind you don't come here again," she said, with her savage eye transfixing him. "Mind you have nothing to do with her by word, look, or message. If you do, it will be worse for you."

"Do you think I regard your threats, my good woman?" he said, with a smile of contemptuous pity.

"If you don't think now that they are worth caring for, you will some day, as sure as you sit there. If you don't mind them now, for your own sake, maybe you will for *her* that you pretend to care so much for. By trying to see her and keep her in mind of you, you'll only make her bed the harder. She'll suffer for it as long as she stays here; and she's not going off. If she don't stay

out of regard for my son, after all he's gone through because of her, I'll find other ways to keep her. You may depend on that, and all you do to make her think of you will only be the worse for her. So go, and don't come here another time."

She dropped the bridle she had grasped, and, turning her back on him, walked away. He rode on slowly and thoughtfully. That last threat of Hagar's had its effect. He did not fear for himself, but he had heard enough of the old dame's malignancy to make him fear that she might persecute Melicent—perhaps do her some terrible harm—if she was further exasperated by his visits or his interference. He resolved to keep away from Melicent for the present, and to watch over her interests indirectly.

CHAPTER XX.

WEEKS of soft Indian-summer weather passed away—not unhappily for Melicent. She found pure pleasure and consolation in the society of her son. It was a comfort to find that, in spite of the rough surroundings and absence of culture in his life, his heart had received no taint. Good impulses seemed to have sprung up spontaneously and grown without training, unless they may have received a direction from the gentle influence of Neil. But Manch was less timid than Neil. He was an outspoken, honest, affectionate child, quick-tempered but generous and forgiving, with a vein of originality and quaint humor in his composition. Melicent would have been interested in him had there been no tie of blood be-

tween them, and would have found it a pleasant task to teach one so eager to learn and so grateful for instruction.

Whatever sad thoughts and heart-sinkings Melicent may have had in her solitary hours, she tasted the happiness of giving pleasure to others. She bought (through her agent, Manch, who was a capital hand at a purchase) a number of little comforts and luxuries for the family household; finer ware and better food for the table, and a supply of such books, magazines, and papers as she thought would awaken the interest and extend the mental range of those for whom they were intended. She read these aloud to the household in the afternoons and lengthening evenings, when they were collected in Hagar's room, which was a pleasant place since Melicent had added to its habitual tidiness the comfortable charm of neat curtains, a shaded lamp, and a few articles of cottage furniture. The quick perception and active imagination of her listeners seized with avidity upon the new food thus presented. Even Hagar, with her unlighted and forgotten pipe in her hand, would sit in the door and listen intently to the lively or pathetic sketches of life, the reminiscences of travel, or sometimes to the quaint legends and fairy tales of Hans Andersen.

Harriet, sitting on a stool at Melicent's feet, was always her most attentive auditor, listening with bright, intent eyes and changing looks, though it was hard to determine whether she understood all that was read, or only reflected the varying expressions in Melicent's face.

The evening readings and the entertaining conversation of Melicent were a blessing to poor Gabriel Griffin.

They brought to his face the first smile, the first bright, interested expression it had worn in many weeks. They lifted him out of the gloomy, taciturn mood in which he had been plunged ever since he found out how cruelly he had been deceived by the French siren who had wiled him into betraying his brother. When he discovered that through his weakness Neil had been taken and condemned to die, his remorse was terrible. Unable to bear, in addition to his own self-reproach, the abuse of Hagar, he hid himself in the woods, and came near falling a victim to starvation.

Whether she talked or read, Melicent was sure of an appreciative listener in Neil. He was deficient in intellectual grasp and of course in education; but he had a finely organized nature for all that. He possessed the swift sympathies, the subtle perceptions, the keen sensibilities that make one companionable and responsive. After all, such a nature as this is infinitely more interesting and lovable than one of a higher culture and colder character.

Neil was possessed of a good deal of mechanical ingenuity, and could handle tools with almost the neatness and dexterity of a skilled workman. Both from the wish to please Melicent and to be employed, he set himself to carrying out all the small improvements she suggested on the place, and, under their united auspices, the "Wildcat's Den" became transformed into a comfortable and even pretty abode. With the aid of a hand or two hired by Melicent, there were soon new palings around the yard, a rustic balustrade to the porch, new windows with shades and curtains; the spaces between the well-hewn logs of which the house was built were filled in with plaster, and

the building and fences received an ample coating of stone-colored wash.

Neil built a little summer-house for Harriet's climbers, and he and Manch brought jasmine-vines from the woods and planted around it. The golden afternoons often tempted them with Melicent and Harriet out into the woods, where the trees were taking gorgeous autumn tints and the purple haze rested on the hill-tops, making them seem dream-like and beautiful. When Manch saw Melicent seated under his favorite ash-tree by the bayou, her hat laid aside and her eyes full of smiles as she surveyed the heap of "treasures" he had taken out from their old repository in his hollow tree, which he had named the "Savings Bank," he would have been perfectly happy but for the cloud he saw creep over his father's face. The old ash-tree had associations for Neil also, and the recollection of loving looks, and words, and kisses, came to him at that moment with the bitter sense that they were for ever things of the past. He put it aside, however, and listened with gentle interest to Manch's lively account of his first meeting with his unknown mother, when, riding upon Monsoon, she had "scared him up" from the bushes; of the fright he had given her by being stunned when the horse stepped upon him; of the progress they made toward acquaintance under the old ash-tree; her patronage of his bird business, from which he had now retired, and her interest in his original "Savings Bank," with its treasure of odd findings and scraps of books.

"I'm a rich chap since then," said Manch. "I have whole books with backs to them, and a trunk to put them in. The good fairy has come to me, as she did to the young folks in the story-books; only instead of being a

little, shriveled old godmother, she's my own mother—the sweetest and dearest mother a boy ever had.”

One afternoon they made a longer excursion than usual—out to a certain pecan-tree, which Manch had reported to be full of nuts. The way led across the bayou and the road that ran on the other side. It was an afternoon of rare beauty. The mellow sunshine sifted through the gold and scarlet-tinted leaves; there was a delicious softness in the air, and a stillness broken only by the cawing of the crows and the chattering of the squirrels in the tall pecan-trees.

The spell of the wild woods wrought upon Neil. The artificial barriers that had seemed to separate Melicent so widely from him disappeared under the free, broad influence of nature. As she walked home by his side in the sunset, and he looked at her sweet face, shaded by the simple straw hat, he longed to take her hand in his and walk, as they had often done, through these same woods, hand in hand.

A bird flew up in their path. They looked at each other. The same recollection flashed through the minds of both. It was at this very spot, under a dogwood-tree not far from the road, that Melicent had once found the two large, clouded eggs of the whippoorwill, laid upon the bare ground, from which the mother-bird had flown up in just such a way as the bird did at this moment. Here she had come with Neil every evening at sunset until the eggs turned into two queer little balls of yellow down.

“This is the same tree,” said Neil softly, as he looked into her eyes. “I wonder if it is the same bird come back to visit her old nest?”

The words were simple, but the look, the tone, made the faint color drop out of Melicent's cheeks. It was the first time he had brought up a circumstance of mutual recollection; it was his first allusion to their past companionship. Melicent felt as though it was a withdrawal of the curtain of silence and reserve that he had permitted to fall between them. She trembled, and, leaning against the tree, said:

"Let us wait for Manch and Harriet."

Then she discovered she had not her gloves.

"I must have left them at the pecan-tree," she said.

Neil went back at once to get them, leaving her standing under the dogwood-tree. There was an undergrowth of sassafras-bushes around it, and she did not see how near she was to the road until she heard the sound of wheels and saw a buggy approaching, drawn by two horses, whose proud shapes had a familiar look. They were driven by a gentleman, who had a lady by his side. As they came nearer, she recognized Mr. Avery and Miss Bradwell. They did not see her; Mr. Avery's pale, handsome face, lighted with a smile, was turned to his companion, whose eyes were lifted to his while she talked with much animation.

Melicent noted his attitude and air of gallant attention; her bright color, her eyes that sparkled under the plumes of her hat. *She*—Melicent—stood there unrecognized, unthought of. Her heart, that had throbbed so wildly when she first recognized him, stood suddenly still, pierced by keen jealousy. A wave of desolation swept over her.

"He has given me up! He has ceased to care for me! O merciful Father, how miserable I am!" she

cried, clasping her hands in the sudden anguish of the moment.

She did not hear a step which had approached her, now walk softly away. She did not know that Neil had stood behind her and heard her exclamation.

A few moments after, Manch came up with Harriet.

"Mother, here are your gloves," he said. "I met father, and he gave them to me. He says we must go on and not wait for him."

Melicent felt at once a chill apprehension that he had seen her agitation, and that it had wounded him. She took Harriet's hand and walked home in silence. Manch was also unwontedly taciturn and dispirited, and Harriet, whose moods reflected those she loved, looked at them in her childlike, puzzled way, and forbore to ask questions or to trouble them with her prattle.

When they reached the house, Manch set down his basket of nuts and hurried back. At the foot of the hill he turned off into a little unused path that he had often trod. He hastened on almost in a run, for twilight was closing in. He reached the old live-oak tree and parted its heavy shroud of moss. Underneath, it was almost dark, and an owl, far up in the moss-muffled branches, sent forth a single unearthly scream. He made his way to the fisherman's hut. His heart sickened as he heard a low groan within. As he entered the dark, damp room, he saw a form seated on the bench beside the unlighted hearth, the head bent down upon the hands. It was the old, remembered attitude. Manch went up to him and put his arm around his neck. Neil looked around.

"Is it you?" he asked, in a husky voice; and drawing the child to him, he wrapped him tightly in his

arms, and sat there silent for some moments. At last he said :

“It is late, and damp under these trees. Why did you come here, Manch ?”

“Because I knew you were here. Oh, father, why did you come to this place ?”

“It’s the only place I’m fit for, boy. I can’t stay yonder, Manch ; I can’t bear it. I’m only fit company for the owls and bats,” he added, trying to force a little lightness into his voice. “I had better come back and live here the rest of my days.”

“Oh, father, father ! In this wretched, uncomfortable place ! Think how unhappy it will make *her*.”

“I make her miserable anyway. There is only one thing I can do to render her happy.”

He did not say what that one thing was, but Manch knew instinctively when he felt the convulsive clasp of his father’s hand and the hot tear that fell upon his forehead. He knew that Neil meant that the one thing he could do for Melicent would be to remove the obstacle of his *life*, which stood between her and her union with the man she loved.

Some minutes passed in silence ; then Neil said gently :

“Manch, it is late ; you must go back ; they will be uneasy.”

“I can’t go without you, father.”

“You must not stay in this damp, dismal place. It would distress your mother, my boy.”

“I will stay where you do.”

“Would you live with me here in this wretched hut, Manch ? or would you go with me wandering into distant

places—often foot-sore and weary, without money to buy food or shelter?”

“I would go with you wherever you went, father. I would leave all to follow you; you need me most,” said the boy, clasping his father’s neck more closely with his slender arm and laying his cheek to his, as in the prison-days.

He spoke no more, and did not move until Neil, rising slowly, said :

“Let us go back. It will not do for you to stay here any longer. The fog is rising from the bayou, and we have no fire to keep down its bad effects.”

And hand in hand they returned through the dusk, and met at the gate the anxious face of Melicent. She asked no questions then, but she knew in her heart where they had been, and she lost sight of her own sorrow in her sympathy for Neil. Pretending to scold them, she playfully took a hand of each (how the touch of her soft fingers thrilled the man who loved her so!), and drew them into the house, where she poured out for them cups of steaming coffee (best antidote for malarial fog), and talked as cheerfully as she could to dispel the sadness she could not fail to see in the face of Neil, reflected, in spite of himself, in the countenance of Manch.

The next day Neil was ill with one of his old rheumatic fevers, and Melicent took her place at his bedside, and nursed him with untiring faithfulness day and night while his sickness lasted. One night, when the fever was at its height, and she was watching him alone, he tossed restlessly and moaned her name. She looked at him a moment, hesitating, and then bent down and kissed his forehead—his lips. He opened his eyes and looked

at her with sudden recognition ; a glow of unutterable happiness overspread his face, and was succeeded by a look of peace. After that, he was tranquil and raved no more, and next morning the physician pronounced him greatly better.

CHAPTER XXI.

As Neil became convalescent, there was one circumstance that forced itself upon him, though it seemed to have escaped the attention of the rest. Hagar had always been so wild and strange in her ways, that any additional degree of singularity was only set down as some new phase of her natural eccentricity. But her conduct now betrayed the influence of an all-absorbing mania. Neil perceived it, and it gave him great uneasiness, even apprehension ; for this mania had Melicent for one of its objects. Hagar's feeling for Melicent was a singular one. Though she often spoke to her harshly and scornfully, she secretly regarded her with almost passionate admiration and pride. She gloried in her beauty, her accomplishments, her refinement—"fine lady ways," as she termed them, which she affected to hold in contempt. She had determined from the first that she would keep Melicent with her at all hazards—a resolve which had its origin partly in her dislike for the "high-headed mayor," who in her eyes represented the *law* she hated so bitterly, conceiving that it had wronged her, and partly in her admiration for Melicent and her love for Neil, which resembled the mother instinct of a savage or an untamed

animal, ready to fight and to die for its offspring, but unable to express itself in gentle words or tender actions.

It was this determination of Hagar to keep Melicent with her as one of her family, and this unreasoning prejudice against Mr. Avery, that Neil saw had grown into insanity. He felt it intuitively when he looked into her eyes as they rested on Melicent, or when she spoke of Mr. Avery or heard his name mentioned. Though her feeling for these two was widely different, she was crazed in respect to both. Mr. Avery had apprehended truly when he feared that she was capable of going almost any length to prevent Melicent from leaving her house and returning (as she supposed she would do) to him—capable of using force or stratagem—of injuring or maiming her in some manner, so that she should not be able to go away. And in her hatred of Mr. Avery, she was equally capable of seizing any opportunity to inflict an injury upon him.

On the day following the election, when it became certain that Mr. Avery was the successful candidate, old Hagar was almost wild with rage. The boom of the town cannon, and the united shouts of many voices huzzaing for "Alexander Avery," could be heard in the stillness of the evening air by the group who stood on the porch of the Griffin cottage. Hagar, eagerly watching Melicent, could see a flash of pride and pleasure light up her face as the acclamations were borne to her ears. She colored as she met the keen eye fastened upon hers, and presently retired into her room. Hagar looked after her with a lowering brow, and, stalking up to Neil, said in a fierce whisper:

"She rejoices at his election. She loves him still.

It is that holds her back from you. She will keep on loving and grieving after him. I told you he would have to be put out of the way. There is no help for it. If you are too weak-hearted, I will have to do it myself."

The third day after this was a *fête* day for nearly all the town. "Welcome," a picturesque village and railway station twenty miles east of Alluvia, was fixed upon as the scene of a congratulatory assemblage and grand banquet in honor of Mr. Avery. News of it reached the Griffins, and one of Manch's acquaintances, who came out early in the morning to borrow "four bits," expressed a sociable wish that he should make one of the excursionists, as it was certain there would be plenty of barbecued beef, beer, and gingerbread; and after dinner "a man and his cat" would go up in a balloon. Old Hagar indignantly flouted the idea of her grandson tacking himself to a set that went for the purpose of cracking their throats shouting for Alexander Avery. She found an errand for Manch which sent him to another part of the yard. Then she leaned over the fence and inquired of the boy at what time the excursion-train would return.

"Nine o'clock to-night," was the reply.

"And will Mr. Avery be on it?"

"Sure," said the boy, who was a printer's devil. "I heard him tell the boss up at our office he would be back to-night, and would come up in the morning and correct the proof of a letter or a speech of his'n they're puttin' into print."

Hagar gave a satisfied nod and turned away with a low chuckle.

Neil had heard her question and noted her peculiar manner. They made him vaguely uneasy. As the day

drew to a close, he became nervous and restless. At dusk the sky was overcast, the moon faintly struggling through a vaporous veil, the air heavy, and occasional lightning-flashes playing across a band of lurid clouds in the east. There seemed to Neil to be storm and thunder lurking in the moral atmosphere as well as the physical. He felt strangely oppressed, and to drive off the feeling he took down his old solace, the violin, and, sitting out on the porch, played snatches of melancholy tunes and sang scraps of sweet old songs to a soft accompaniment. Melicent came in with Harriet from the front yard, where she had been watering the flowers and the vines freshly planted around the new summer-house. Leaning against the post, she listened to Neil's music, that had a wild sweetness peculiar to it. Manch, sitting inside the room by the table with its lighted lamp, was absorbed in a sum. A moment before, the tall, gaunt figure of Hagar had been seen stalking across the yard in the direction of the stable, which she insisted on locking every night with her own hands, after she had first inspected the horses. Harriet sat on the door-step, fanning herself with a broad leaf of the Palm-of-Christian's. All at once there rose from the cottonwood-tree near at hand the mournful cry of the screech-owl, or death-owl, as it is superstitiously called. Harriet started up in affright, and ran trembling to Melicent.

"It's a bad sign!" she cried. "Something's going to happen."

"Something is always happening," Melicent said cheerfully; but that quivering wail had struck a chill to her heart also.

"There, Pretty Lady!" cried Harriet, "I have turned

your glove wrong side out. I will shake it at him and he will fly away."

She did so; there was a rustle in the foliage, and the owl flew away with a soft whir.

"There!" said the girl, relieved. But as she uttered the exclamation, the cry rang from the tree close beside the porch where they sat. It was followed by the peculiar shuddering moan that sometimes closes the note of the bird.

"Oh!" exclaimed Harriet; "that's the death-trembles! The sign means death! it means death!"

She ran into the house and closed the door behind her. Neil rose and drove the owl away, but the circumstance had affected him. The feeling of impending calamity, the premonition that something strange and awful was about to occur, came over him more strongly. To dispel it, he began to play again; but it seemed that only melancholy notes would come from the strings of his violin. Moved by some irrepressible impulse, he sang the song so associated in his mind with Melicent—the old, simple ballad of love and despair—"Beneath the Willow-Tree." His timidity seemed to vanish, and on the last verse he dwelt with all the pathos of his voice:

"She hears me not, she cares not,
Nor will she list to me;
While here I lie, alone to die,
Beneath the willow-tree."

In the heavy hush of the evening air, the leaves of the cottonwood did not stir. Neil could hear Melicent's deep, agitated breathing, as she leaned so near him. A strange feeling came over him. His soul seemed to ex-

pand—to claim for the first time affinity and equality with that of the woman by his side. At the same time, a sadness, deep but quiet, weighed upon him. Involuntarily a heavy sigh escaped him. Melicent broke the silence.

“I do not think it is right for you to be exposed to the night air. Remember you are not yet well.”

“The air is cool to my forehead,” he said. “My head aches and feels heavy.”

“I am afraid you have fever again,” Melicent said anxiously. Then she laid her hand lightly against his forehead. He was bolder than he had ever been since their meeting. He put his own hand over hers and drew her fingers to his lips in a long, fervent kiss. Tears gushed from his eyes and fell upon Melicent’s hand. Impelled by a swift rush of pity and tenderness, she bent down and kissed his forehead, when suddenly she felt herself clasped in his arms and pressed to his breast.

Did he notice her involuntary shrinking from his embrace? He withdrew his arms from around her.

“Forgive me,” he murmured sadly. “It seemed to me that you were Milly again, and that I was dying—parting from you for ever.”

It seemed strange and morbid, but such was his feeling at the moment; and when it passed, the shadowy presentiment lingered and weighed upon him.

Harriet came out upon the porch.

“I wonder where mother is?” she said. “She went out, and has never come back.”

Neil rose hastily, his vague uneasiness at once taking shape. It was nothing unusual for Hagar to be abroad at night. When there was moonlight especially, she

often wandered about for hours alone, in a restless, purposeless way. But to-night Neil felt as if her wanderings might have more design. From the look of her eye that day, she was not to be trusted. There had been insanity in its gleam. He went out at once, saying, in reply to Melicent's remonstrance upon his imprudence, that he was only going a little way; his mother was probably around the yard or stable; he would get her to come in, for a storm seemed coming up. There had been, indeed, a change in the sky and in the air within the last few moments. There was a low sound of wind in the topmost branches of the trees, though the air below was still close and foggy. The cloud-pall that covered the sky had darkened visibly, and but a faint moonlight illumined Neil's pathway. He did not once stop to think, but, drawn by a fear that scarcely shaped itself into thought, he made his way to the railroad track. With every step he took, the darkness increased, and a misty rain began to fall. The point he aimed to reach was a broad ravine, across which the track was laid upon a steep embankment. It was a mile from the house, and his limbs were much weakened by the recent fever. Before he reached the place he was tottering with exhaustion; but he dragged himself along through the darkness, the rain, and the wind, until at last he gained the ravine. He stepped upon the embankment, and staggered a few paces forward. A black mass rose before him, undefined in the darkness. He stood still, and at that instant a flash of light revealed what the obstacle was, and proved the justness of his fears. Right across the railroad track was piled a heap composed of logs, rails, blocks, and sticks of wood, dead limbs of trees, and

other substances, to the height of several feet; and behind it stood Hagar—her eyes rolling wildly, drops of perspiration standing on her swarthy forehead, the veins swollen on her temples, the muscles standing out on her bare arms in the terrific exertion she had used to collect the heavy materials and rear the pile she designed as the instrument of death. The wild strength of insanity, added to her own great muscular power, had enabled her to do the work with astonishing rapidity. In the bright flash of lightning, Neil saw her form, her face, her terrible eyes, with vivid distinctness. She saw him also; her eyes glared like those of a tigress about to be deprived of its prey.

“Back!” she cried. “Go back, wretched boy. You have no business here!”

He did not answer. He paused one instant, while his mind took in the emergency. In a few moments, he knew, the train with the party of excursionists would be here. It would rush around the curve—a little distance beyond—and in the rain and darkness, the head-light would fail to reveal the obstruction until too late; the cars would be thrown off the track and down the steep embankment, with all their freight of lives—with the *one life* that was so dear to *her*, so necessary to her happiness. It would be useless for him to try to attract the notice of the engineer; he was too exhausted to run forward and shout, even if his feeble shouting could be heard above the roar and rush of the train; and he had no materials wherewith to strike a signal-light.

At once he formed his resolve, and, exhausted as he was, began to lay hold of the obstructions and throw

them from the track. She darted upon him and caught his arm.

“Let it alone!” she shrieked. “Fool! what are you about? You can’t throw it all off in time. The train will be here in two minutes, and he is on it. Do you hear? He is on it—the man she loves! He will be killed—crushed to pieces, as he deserves—and Melicent will be yours!”

He did not speak; he had not strength or breath to spare; he needed all his feeble power to lift the obstacles, one by one, and throw them beyond the rails. She quit-
ted her hold of him, sprang after the pieces he had thrown off, and began to hurl them back upon the pile. Then he turned upon her, and panting gasped out:

“Stop, I charge you, or by the God above I will denounce you as the one who did this! You will hang upon the gallows!”

At that threat she stopped. She had seen her husband hung; her son, with the rope around his neck, struggling in agony. The gallows had a terror even for her. She stopped and stepped back a pace, but still called upon him to hold, shaking her bony arm at him in rage and distraction.

“Let it be!” she cried. “It is no business of yours what happens. It is not your doing. Go back home; get into your bed. To-morrow Melicent will be yours.”

He lifted a long, heavy rail and turned it from the road.

“Melicent pities you, but she loves him—she loves him; she will go to him yet!” shrieked the mad woman.

He uttered no word of reply. All the slender power of his enfeebled frame was needed for the task before him. His brain reeled—his breath came in short gasps—fierce pains darted through his body—his limbs shook, as though they would sink under him. The weakness was overpowering, but he struggled desperately against it.

“O God, give me strength!” he prayed as his fingers closed upon the objects composing the pile, now lessening under his exertions.

Suddenly a whirring, roaring noise was heard. It came nearer.

“It is the train!” shouted Hagar. “Come away! They will find us here; we will be taken up. Come, I am going!”

She grasped his arm, but he shook her off and went on with his work. The roaring increased; the heavy panting of the engine could be heard directly around the curve. It was rushing on at full speed.

“Come!” again shouted Hagar. “I tell you they will find us here and arrest us!”

She ran a few steps along the track, calling to him in a voice of alarm and agony. He did not heed her. There were now a few small obstacles upon the track and one large piece of split timber. A strong, well man could have raised it with ease, but Neil's feeble strength was nearly spent. The head-light of the train, glaring dimly through rain and mist, burst into sight around the curve as Neil, concentrating all his remaining vitality in one desperate effort, lifted the timber and threw it outside the rails. As he did so he staggered and fell heavily across the track. With a wild scream, his mother darted to him and bent to lift him in her arms. It was too late. The

panting, fire-breathing engine rushed upon them like a living demon. A cry from the engineer, a jolt, a shrill whistle, a shriller, blood-curdling shriek from Hagar, and the train thundered on.

The engine was speedily reversed; men leaped from the cars while the train was yet in motion, and hurried back to the scene of the catastrophe. There lay the victims—one dead, with his calm face upturned to the sky; the other fearfully crushed, mortally wounded, but still alive—still able to glare at them with the wild eyes of a dying tigress.

“Go away!” she cried, as Mr. Avery pressed nearer. “Don’t come here to gloat over my pain. You, you are the cause of this. If I could have killed you, I would die satisfied. Now, you have your wish; he is dead, and you have her for your own! Curse you—curse you for ever!”

CHAPTER XXII.

NEARLY two years had passed since the death of Neil and Hagar. Melicent was standing one summer evening with Harriet and two young girls under the shade of a great oak in front of a pleasant country-house a few miles from St. Louis. She was graver and paler than when we saw her first as Mr. Avery’s bride; but there was a depth of feeling in her eye and in the tones of her voice, and there was the sweetness of charity and sympathy in her smile. She had known much sorrow, and it had deepened and purified her nature. She had been for the past

eighteen months a music-teacher in a female seminary in St. Louis. It was now her vacation, and she was spending the holiday with one of her pupils, whose home was a short distance in the country.

Manch had also his summer vacation, and the present of a gun and a set of fishing-tackle from his mother made him so much a denizen of the woods that Melicent began to fear lest with the revival of old habits there might be a recurrence of the deep melancholy that had possessed him for so long a time after his father's death. She knew the woods had sorrowful associations for the child—associations that would not soon be forgotten; for he had mourned the loss of his father with a passionate persistence of grief. It was for his sake even more than her own that Melicent had left Alluvia—a spot burdened with sad reminiscences. She placed him at a school but a few doors from the institute where she taught, and where she had been permitted to keep Harriet. The girl's gentle, affectionate ways, and her unselfish disposition, made her a universal favorite in the seminary. She would never be of strong intellect, but her mind had developed greatly, and she exhibited an extraordinary genius, or rather instinct, for music. It was a pure gift of nature, for she knew not a note of music nor would she ever be able to comprehend it as a science; but she could play with marvelous sweetness any tune she liked, and she sang with a pathos and purity that constantly reminded Melicent of Neil. She resembled him also in features, and her eyes, with their long lashes, had the same wistful sadness, with sometimes a startled glance like that of a frightened deer.

She was the first to discover a horseman who came

riding rapidly to the house. When he saw the group under the tree, he dismounted, and came toward them with a letter in his hand. Approaching Melicent, whom he seemed to know, the messenger held out the envelope, saying:

“Here is a telegram marked ‘Haste.’ It came for you three days ago, and was sent to the seminary. I did not know of it until this afternoon, when I determined to ride out and bring it to you.”

Thanking him, Melicent took the slip of paper hurriedly from the inclosure, and read:

“Mr. Avery is very ill. He raves for you incessantly. Come at once.

“WILSON.”

Very ill! And the telegram was dated three days ago. Oh! most likely he was already dead! Dead! without her having seen him—without her having obtained his forgiveness for her coldness, her unkindness in refusing to see him before she left Alluvia, or to reply to the letters he sent breathing the tenderest devotion. With Neil’s dead face fresh in her mind, with the thought of his lonely, patient, sorrowful life before her, it had seemed a sacrilege to think of love and happiness—to see or communicate with the man who had supplanted Neil in her heart.

And so she had gone away from Alluvia, and in all this time she had sent no token of remembrance to Mr. Avery, and had returned, without a word, an inclosure of money she knew had been sent by him. So unkind had she been to him in her remorseful regret for

Neil. Yet she had loved him all the while—had pined for one look from the blue eyes that, so cold to others, were so tender to her. Weary and lonely, she had often stifled the longing to rest in his strong arms. Was it too late—too late for love, or even for forgiveness? As the train whirled her away across the night-darkened country, she chided its slowness as hill and plain, town and river went flying past.

At last the goal was reached, her journey was at an end. The cab set her down at the door of the well-remembered house. She rang the bell with a trembling hand. In the hall she came face to face with Dr. Wilson. He extended his hand with a smile. Oh! the joyful assurance there was in that smile!

“He is better; he passed the crisis four days ago,” he said in answer to the inquiry in her haggard eyes. “He expects you. Come to him at once; your presence will be a better restorative than my medicine.”

Leaving Manch and Harriet below, she went with Dr. Wilson up stairs. At the door of the sick-room he signed to her to remain without while he entered alone. She could hear him say to his patient:

“Be calm, my friend. She has come, she is here; but you must be quiet.”

“Yes, yes, Doctor; only let me see her at once,” returned the low, eager voice.

Dr. Wilson reappeared outside, with tears in his smiling eyes.

“Go in,” he said; “God bless you!” and he shook hands with Melicent.

Aleck was sitting in an easy-chair, with his dressing-gown wrapped around him. He stretched out his arms

and tried to rise, but the effort was too much for him, and he fell back upon the seat.

She came to him; she knelt down beside him, and put her arms around him. Both were silent while their hearts throbbed together after the long separation.

“My darling,” he said at length, “you have come to me at last. You kept away from me so long, Melicent. I have been so desolate, so miserable without you.”

“My heart has been with you all the while,” she whispered, looking up at him with beaming eyes.

That evening there was a marriage ceremony in the sick-room. Those whom a strange fate had parted, were now united in a bond that death alone should sever. There were no witnesses save the officiating minister, Manch, Harriet, and good Dr. Wilson.

Two Sabbaths afterward they attended church together, and many came forward after service with outstretched hands of welcome and congratulation. Melicent acknowledged their attentions with gentle courtesy. Not once did her lip curl at the memory of past unkindness, and the suspicion of present hypocrisy and hollowness. Much sorrow had taught her charity, and from the lesson of Neil's life she had learned patience and gentleness.

When the congregation had dispersed, Mr. Avery led Melicent out into the churchyard, lying with all its peaceful graves in the shade and sunshine of the still summer afternoon. He stopped beneath a live-oak tree hung with long moss. Underneath it was a new and beautiful monument. The design was peculiar. A cross of black marble rested lengthwise upon a heart carved of the purest white marble, without flaw or blemish. This in

turn rested upon a slab, bordered by a wreath of carved ivy-leaves and supported by four marble pedestals. Upon the slab Melicent read through her tears:

“ IN MEMORY
OF
NEIL GRIFFIN,
WHO WITH A PURE AND BRAVE HEART
BORE THROUGH LIFE
A CROSS
HEAVY WITH MANY TRIALS;
A MARTYR,
WHO, IN SAVING OTHER LIVES,
SACRIFICED HIS OWN.”

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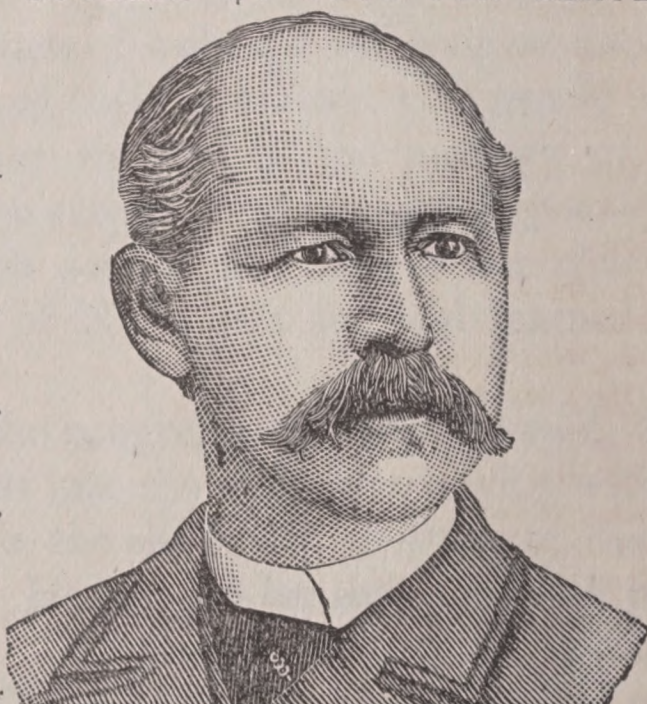
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